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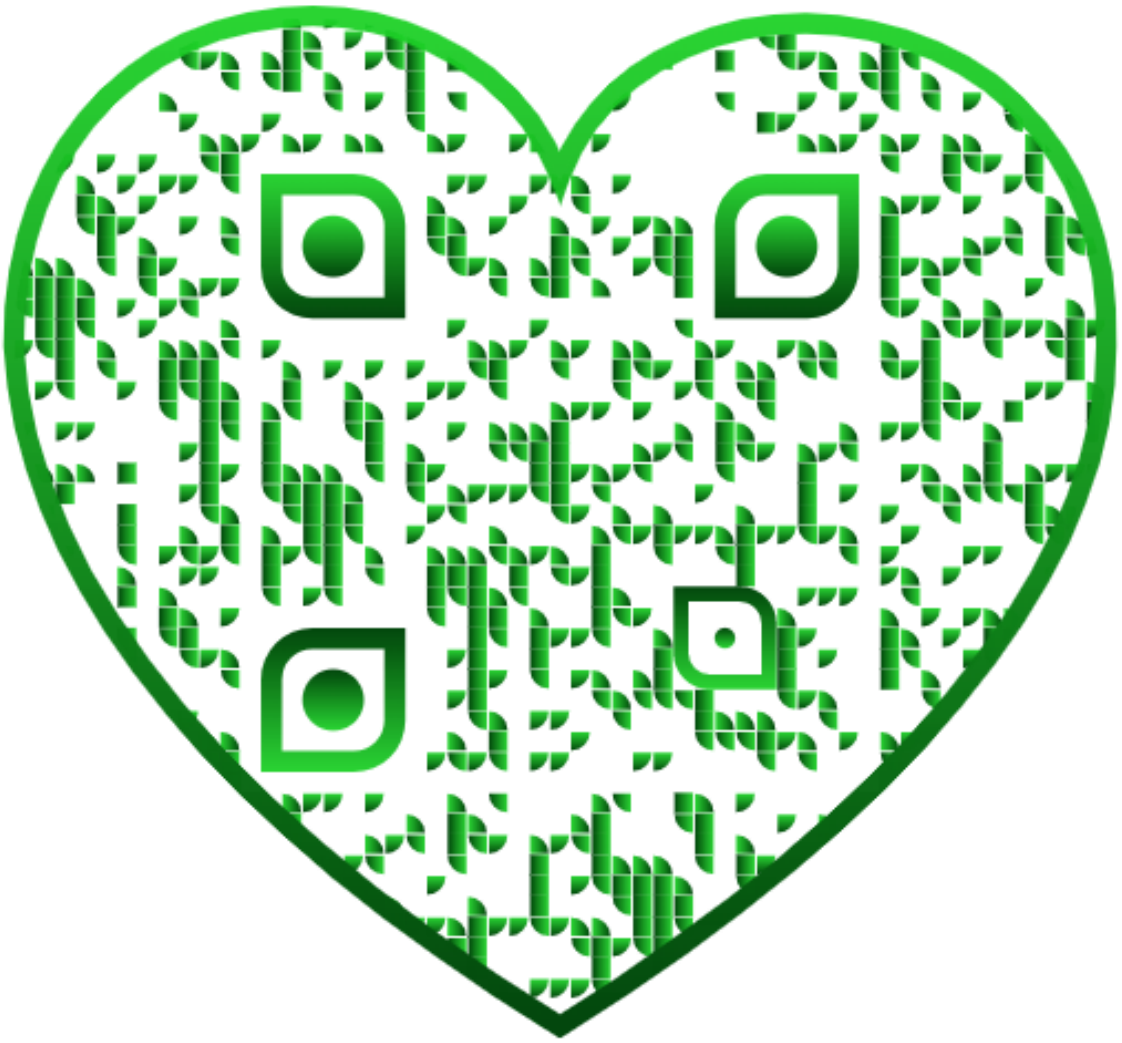

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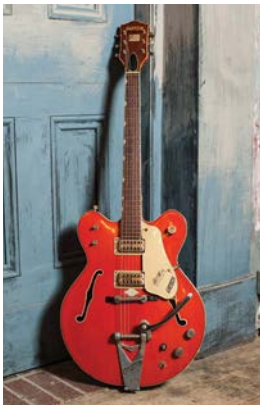
# *Songs in the key of G...*

The Gretsch guitar brand may be synonymous with rockabilly, but flick through any half-decent record collection and you'll find a spectacular amount of variation in G-branded guitar tones – from Bo Diddley to Malcolm Young, Eddie Cochran to John Squire, Brian Setzer to Johnny Marr. My own personal love for Gretsch began before I was old enough to have any awareness of guitar companies or even understand anything about the sounds I was listening to beyond the fact that they were made by voices, drums and guitars.

It was, inevitably, The Beatles, and specifically the *Please Please Me* LP that was so often on heavy rotation when I was growing up – I have parents who were teenagers in the 60s to thank for that. So George's wiry lead work on his black Duo Jet, his "first real decent guitar", helped me define what a great guitar sound ought to be in the same way that John's voice remains my high-water mark when it comes to lead vocals.

Years later, I bought a black Duo Jet with Dynasonics, but ended up selling it (long story) to a 'George' in a Beatles tribute band. These days, I'm the proud owner of a Filter'Tron-equipped G6137TCB Center Block Panther that has been my main gigging and recording guitar for the last few years. That one's not going anywhere...

I hope you enjoy this celebration of all things Gretsch – we reckon it's the best edition of *G&B Classics* to date; let us know what you think.



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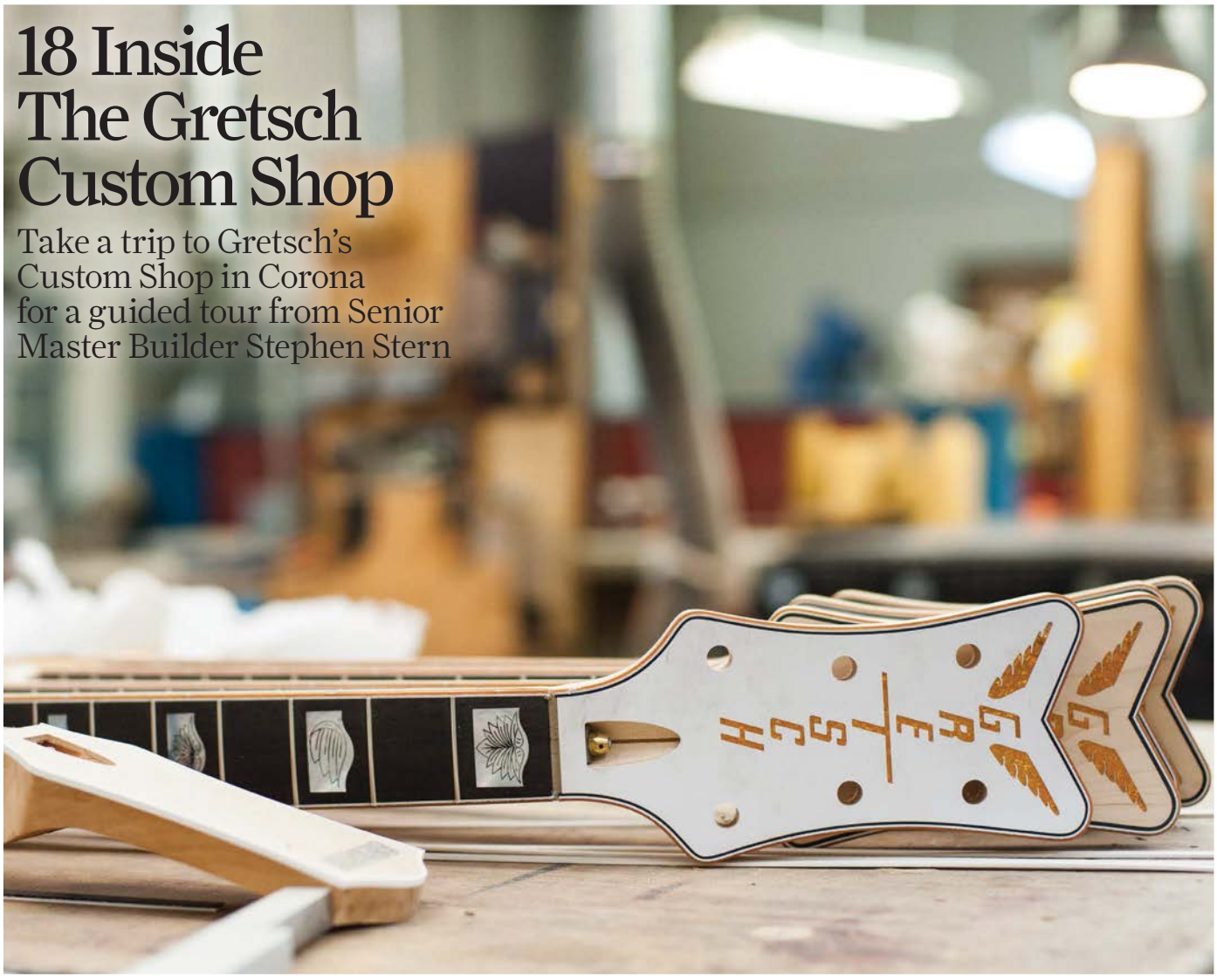

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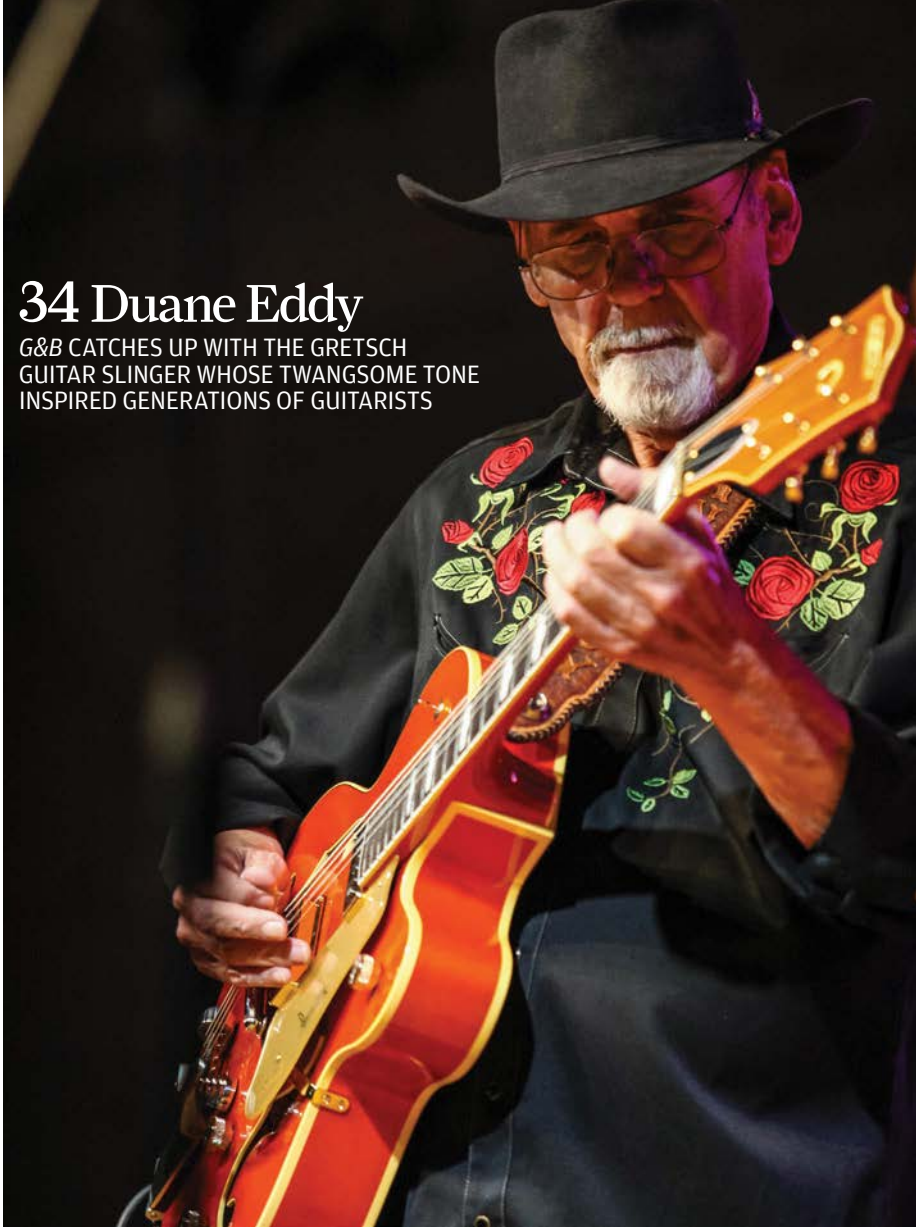

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This Gretsch Electromatic II, with Melita bridge and old-style script logo, was built in 1954

# The History Of Gretsch

## Life's too short to spend cowering in the shadow of your amplifier with an anonymous guitar. If you want real stage-strutting presence, there's only one place to go, and that's Gretsch – the brand with more jaw-dropping finishes and more sheer charisma than any other

Archive images **Backbeat Books**

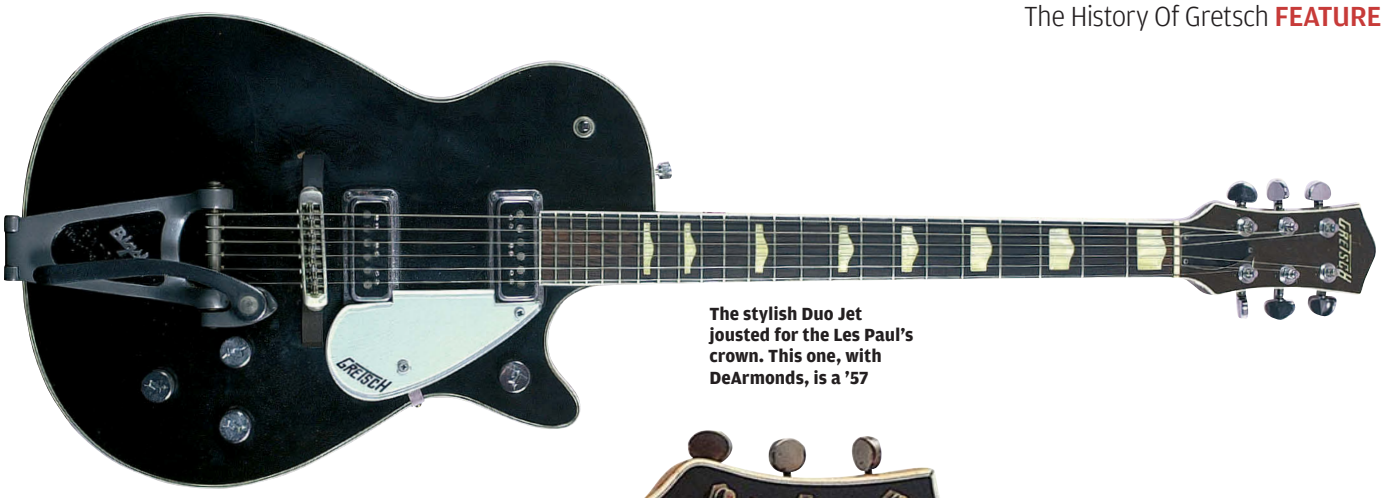
Filter'Trons. HiLo'Trons. Actionflo. Electrotone. Project-O-Sonic. Floating Sound and the T-Zone Tempered Treble. Fleetwoods, Corsairs, Eldorados and Constellations. Cadillac Green, Platinum Grey and Bamboo Yellow...

Gretsch terminology is more exotic and enticing than the hyperbole in any glossy 1950s automobile brochure, and this is the key: while Gibson offered steady quality-led innovation and Fender invented a brave new world of futuristic solidbodies, the Gretsch company offered pure glamour – the six-stringed equivalent, if you like, of the Hollywood dream.

Would-be Gretsch owners and star-struck catalogue-flippers in the 50s couldn't give a busted celluloid plectrum that the insides of their dream guitars sometimes looked like half-completed DIY kitchen projects, all furry plywood and dangerous splinters. What mattered with Gretsch was the guitars' magnetism: an awesome big-bodied presence topped by a never-ending array of lustrous, extrovert paint jobs and studded with switches, electronic add-ons and gadgets that changed faster than Scottish weather. At its height, from the late-50s and into the 60s, Gretsch was Widget Central.

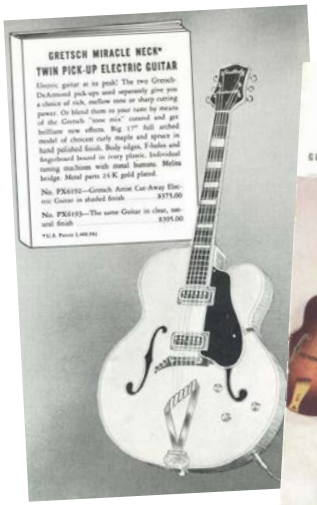
> What Gretsch offered was pure glamour – the six-stringed equivalent of the Hollywood dream

But, along the way, Gretsch made some extremely good instruments – guitars which, like the Strat and the Les Paul and an exclusive clutch of others, helped form and define a certain way of approaching the guitar. Pick up a Chet Atkins 6120, a Country Gent, a Falcon, a Duo Jet or the like and you'll probably instinctively play it like a Gretsch: way-wide Bigsby-wobbled chords, cool jazzy inversions, bouncy rhythms, straight-line melodies. Maybe the famous 'Gretsch sound' trumpeted in the company's leaflets and adverts was often as much the result of physical limitations as it was the boundless possibilities of the company's electronic wizardry... but if a guitar has bags of vibe makes you want to play it, what does that matter?



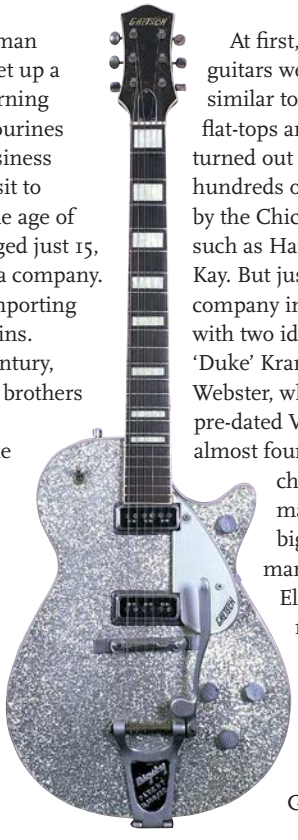
**The stylish Duo Jet jousted for the Les Paul's crown. This one, with DeArmonds, is a '57**

**The Electromatic II morphed into the beautiful Country Club, with hump-top inlays and often seen in a Cadillac Green finish**



1883 was the year that German emigrant Friedrich Gretsch set up a little business in Brooklyn turning out drums, banjos and tambourines on a wholesale basis. The business prospered, but on a return visit to Germany, Friedrich died at the age of 39, so Friedrich's son Fred, aged just 15, found himself at the head of a company. Undaunted, he set to work importing cymbals and making mandolins.

Just after the turn of the century, Fred was joined for a time by brothers Louis and Walter, and the business really took off. By the start of World War I, the Fred Gretsch Manufacturing Co was housed in a whopping 10-storey building and was turning out not just drums and mandolins but a vast array of banjos, fiddles, marching band instruments, accordions, accessories and, by the beginning of the 1930s, guitars.



At first, Gretsch guitars were very similar to the other flat-tops and archtops turned out in their hundreds of thousands by the Chicago giants such as Harmony and Kay. But just after World War II, with the company in the hands of Fred Gretsch Jr and with two ideas men in the picture – salesman 'Duke' Kramer and demonstrator Jimmie Webster, whose 'touch' style of playing pre-dated Van Halen and Stanley Jordan by almost four decades – Gretsch decided to stop churning out basic guitars for the mail-order world. It went upmarket, big style, entering the electric-guitar market properly in 1949 with the Electromatic Spanish, a normal non-cutaway archtop guitar with a built-in Rowe pickup (Rowe was owned by Harry DeArmond, and this partnership would last for decades). This model took technology no further than Gibson had already with the ES-150 of 1936, but 1951's cutaway models – the Electromatic and Electro II – were better, and better yet was the company's riposte to Gibson's shocking adoption of the solidbody format, the 1953 Duo Jet (available in other colours, such as the Silver Jet, pictured left).

Semi-solid, with a routed mahogany body topped with a pressed arched top, the Duo Jet sounded different to the Les Paul and had plenty of its own charm. Its single-coil DeArmonds were more open-sounding than Gibson's P-90s, while the bridge – designed by Sebastiano 'Johnny' Melita – offered the same fine-tuning as Gibson's tune-o-matic, although it obstructed the hand.

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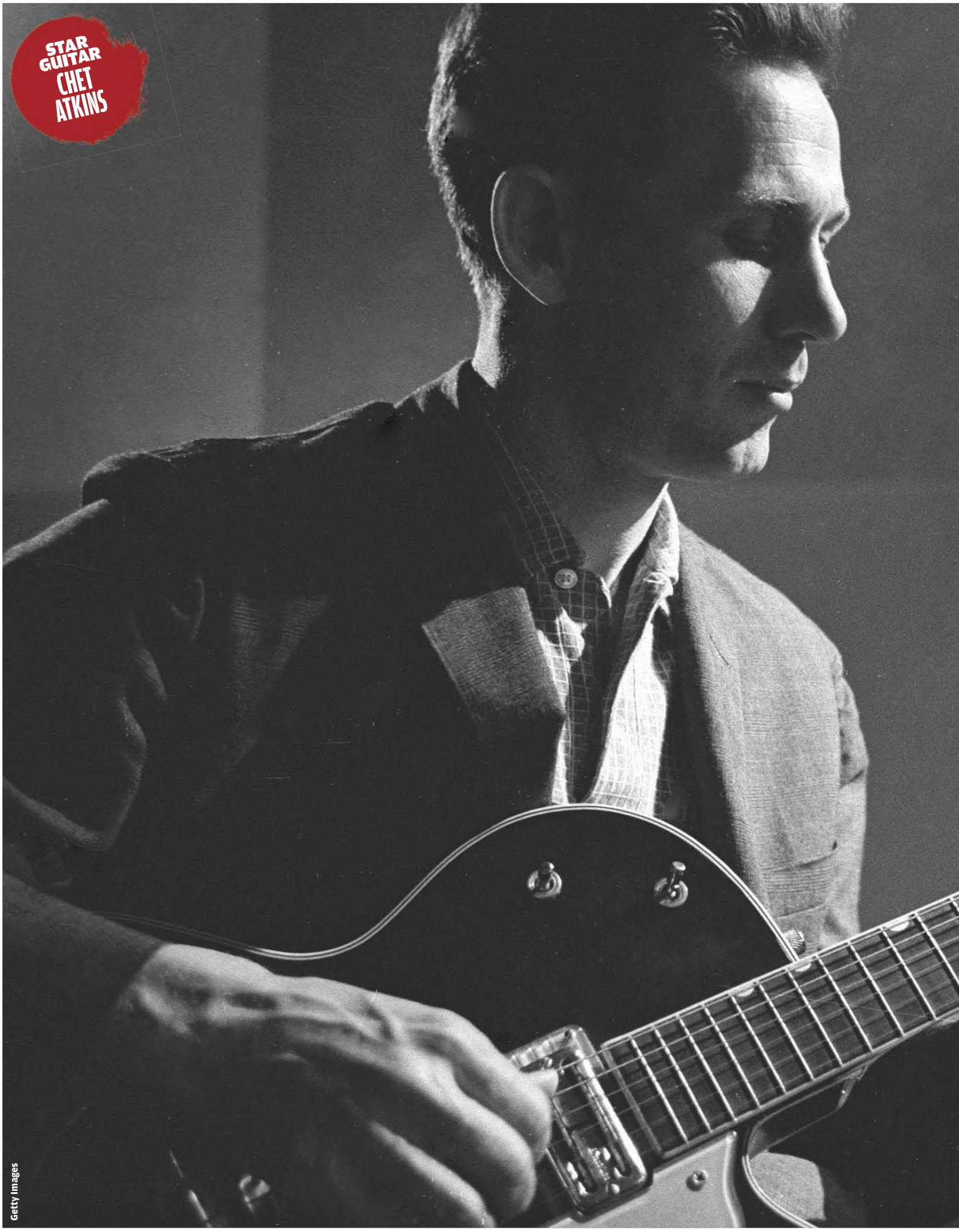



Getty Images

**Chet Atkins: Gretsch's first endorsee, his name and signature features on 16 Gretsch models, including the 6120, Country Gentleman and Tennessean**

The 6120 Chet Atkins Hollow Body is the most highly regarded vintage Gretsch of all. This is a double-cutaway model built in 1962

Around this time, Gretsch guitars stole a march on the opposition by going into cahoots with its drum-making department. Gretsch had established techniques for covering plywood drum shells with a variety of cool materials – not just black plastic (which featured on the Duo Jet) but also sparkle finishes. The glittery Silver Jet flounced onto the scene in 1954 and may not have sold that many, but its impact was undeniable. Gretsch also started to splash out in the paint room, using DuPont car paint (later employed by Fender for its 'custom colours'). The Country Club received lashings of Cadillac Green paint, the new Streamliner came in dark gold Jaguar Tan and other mid-50s models came in fetching two-tone pastel greens, yellows, greys and ivories.

White was the chosen shade for Gretsch's most famously ornate guitar, the White Falcon. This six-stringed glitzerama burst upon the scene in 1955 with gold-sparkle plastic binding, engraved pearl position markers, gold hardware – including an over-the-top bumper-style tailpiece – and a huge V-topped headstock carrying a 'winged' Gretsch logo. At a whacking $600, the Falcon was nearly as expensive as Gibson's most prestigious archtop electric – the Super 400CES. The message was unmistakable: Gretsch had arrived.

> Over the years, the Chet Atkins Hollow Body grew to be a best-seller, and it was chosen by Eddie Cochran, Brian Setzer and Pete Townshend

## Chet and the 50s

Aside from super-lux models with lush paintjobs, Gretsch was becoming aware of the value of 'name' players in its roster. Sure, the company now had a few: sessioneer Al Caiola (who later enjoyed his own Epiphone model) and New York studio whizz Mary Osborne. But Gretsch needed someone new – a big, genre-crossing name on the same level as Gibson's figurehead, Les Paul.

What the company got was the best: Chet Atkins. Chet was making a big name for himself in Nashville circles, and when Jimmie Webster

## THE VINTAGE GRETSCH TIMELINE

**1883**
The Fred Gretsch Manufacturing Company is set up by Friedrich Gretsch in Brooklyn

**1933**
The first true Gretsch-branded guitars appear in both archtop and flat-top styles

**1939**
Gretsch's first pickup-equipped Electromatic model appears in the company's catalogue

**1949**
The first of the modern-era Gretsch electrics, with a Rowe pickup but no cutaway, is released

**1952**
Gretsch's use of the Melita Synchro-Sonic bridge beats Gibson's tune-o-matic by a year

**The spectacular 6136 White Falcon runs a close second for desirability. It was launched in 1954; this is a '55**

**A 1956 Chet Atkins Solidbody**

approached him, he was interested – but none of Gretsch's existing models would persuade him to put down his D'Angelico Excel with an added Gibson pickup. Why, asked Atkins, didn't Gretsch allow him to design his own model?

Fred Gretsch Jr scoffed ('that hillbilly guitar player', he called him), but Webster was adamant and the deal went ahead. Atkins visited New York and he and the Gretsch boffins drew up a fine-looking orange-coloured semi based on the recently-launched Streamliner. The prototype arrived without the vital Bigsby vibrato and strewn with Western motifs borrowed from the Round Up, a tumbleweed-flavoured Duo Jet, including cacti and steers' heads inlays up the neck and a belt-buckle tailpiece – not at all to Atkins' taste, but he relented. Over the years, the 6120 Chet Atkins Hollow Body was simplified and grew to be one of Gretsch's best-sellers, as well as the model chosen by Eddie Cochran, Brian Setzer, Pete Townshend and many others. Chet's other signature models spanned from the lowly ('58's Tennessean) to the high-end, such as '57's wide-but-thin Country Gentleman.

## The 60s are go

Like Gibson and Fender, most of Gretsch's big ideas came in the 50s: the following decade was spent making subtle alterations. Moving away from the traditional dimensions of the jazz age, the guitars became shallower; the White Falcon, the Country Club, Tennessean and Hollow Body all followed the slimline Country Gentleman. Many, both semi-acoustic and semi-solid, moved from single-cutaways to double – even the lovely Duo Jet, which now featured a double-cut body like Gibson's SG, even though Gibson may secretly have felt that the SG was a bad idea.

Jimmie Webster busied himself generating a blizzard of add-on gadgetry. It looked impressive in the catalogues, but failed to add much realistic firepower for most normal players. Webster himself, in fact, was one of the very few who could make full use of the stereo White Falcon with its mind-boggling '54 tonal variations'.

This was Gretsch's most successful era. In the mid-50s, Gretsch was making about 10 >

**1953**
The Duo Jet model, a semi-solid competitor to the successful Gibson Les Paul, is launched

**1954**
Spotlight guitars: the first year for green and gold finishes, plus sparkle tops

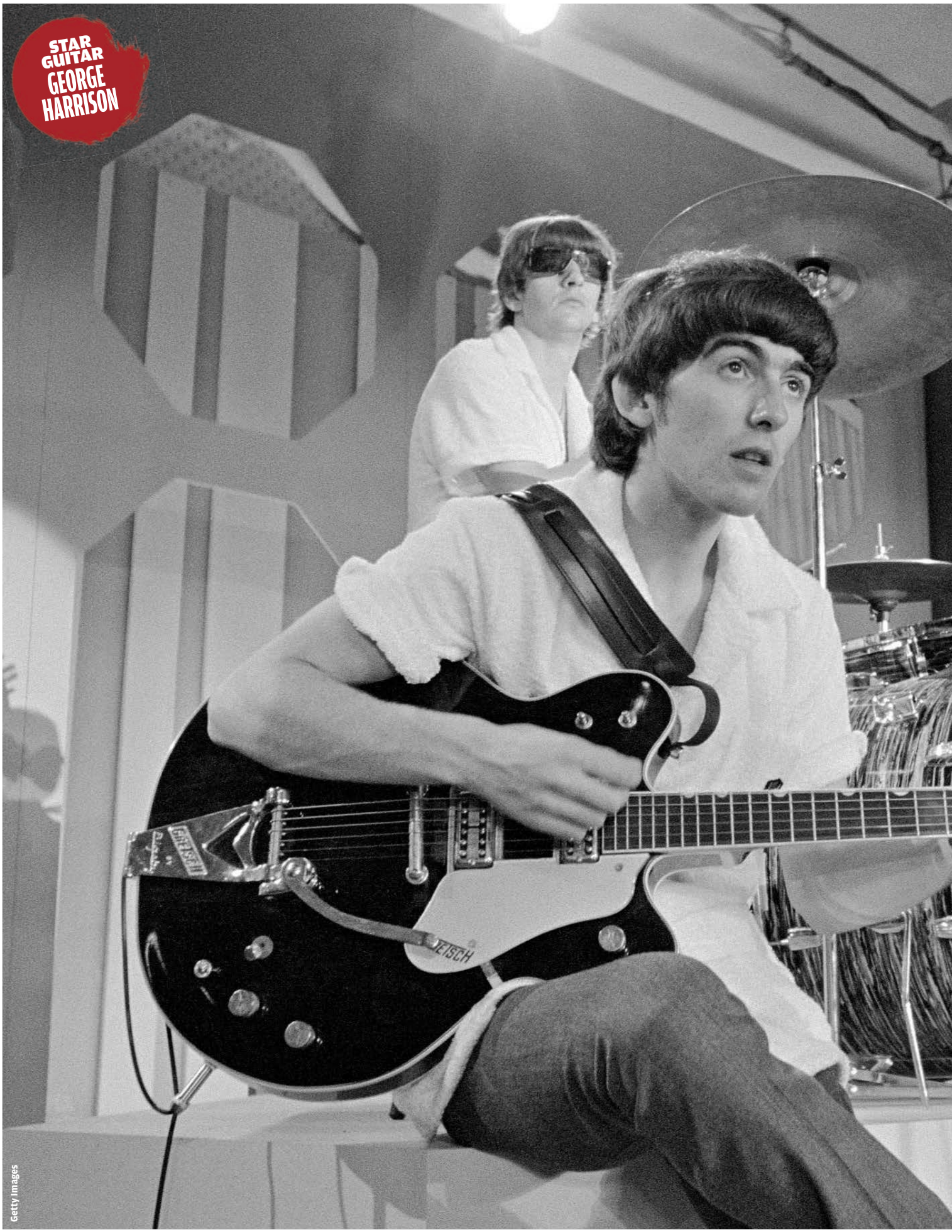
**1957**
Gretsch's new humbucking Filter'Tron pickup is unveiled at NAMM; Gibson has the PAF

**1964**
George Harrison uses a Country Gent on The Ed Sullivan Show. Gretsch sales shoot up

**1967**
Gretsch is bought by piano/organ maker Baldwin. It's the end of the classic era

**1980**
After struggling in the 1970s with leftfield designs and Japanese parts, production ceases

**1989**
The unlikely Traveling Wilburys model heralds a whole new line of import Gretsches




Getty Images

**George Harrison preparing to change the course of pop music history with his Gretsch Country Gent during rehearsals for The Ed Sullivan Show in Florida, February 1964**

**This 1959 Country Gentleman has 'neo classical' or 'thumbprint' fingerboard markers, Filter'Trons and two extra knobs for raising and lowering the bridge mutes**

guitars per day; by the mid-60s it was turning out close to 100. Gretsch expanded further with a host of quick-selling models: the solid-body Corvette, the gadget-strewn Viking, the semi-acoustic 12-string and the Blackhawk semi-acoustic.

## The swinging 60s

Gretsch received two interesting boosts in the late-60s – one from some guys with funny hats on a zany TV show, the other from a supergroup beloved of serious chin-stroking music fans. Monkees leader Mike Nesmith's Byrdsian twang of choice was a natural-finish 12-string 6076 – he also owned a White Falcon – and Peter Tork used a 6073 bass, rather like a four-string Tennessean with two pickups and a spiky headstock. Gretsch chose to issue a short-lived Monkees model in 1966, a funky red double-cutaway item with Super'Tron pickups (roughly like Filter'Trons, but with blade polepieces), double thumbnail inlays, a white scratchplate and a Bigsby.

A heavier but unofficial endorsement around the same time came from Stephen Stills of Buffalo Springfield and later – of course – Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. Long-time fan Stills referred to his Gretsches as his 'country guitars' and generally carried about six on the road, including two White Falcons and three Country Gents, all medium-strung with 0.011 to 0.052 strings, including a wound third – vital, he explained, for keeping them in tune. He has also owned three Chet Atkins and a White Penguin – the Duo Jet-bodied version of the White Falcon, now a holy grail for collectors. Then there's Neil Young, who in his days playing alongside Stills relied upon either a 1963 orange 6120 or a White Falcon – the latter often a lovely '59/'60 model. He's also owned at least three other Falcons, dating from the late-50s to the 70s.

> Stephen Stills referred to his Gretsches as his 'country guitars' and generally carried about six on the road

## Changes on the way

Fortunes began to change in 1967, when Baldwin – the piano and organ makers, who had missed out on buying Fender in '65 but had snapped up Burns – this time made a winning bid for Gretsch. Fred Jr, it's thought, had decided that with no obvious heir to take over his company, this would be a good time to sell his $6 million-a-year business.

However, much like CBS with Fender, Baldwin didn't really understand the Gretsch guitar business and in 1970, when guitar sales figures had failed to soar, it made the decision to move manufacturing away from Gretsch's historic Brooklyn home to Booneville, Arkansas. As Gibson found just three years later when shifting from Kalamazoo to Nashville, efficiency on paper didn't necessarily add up to better guitars – or a happier workforce. Gretsch carried on, of course: Baldwin faffed around and produced some new-ish models, such as the active-powered Rally semi-acoustic; it reintroduced 'open' f-holes instead of the fake ones Gretsch had designed to help minimise feedback and brought in a new truss-rod system, courtesy of Burns. Luckily, Baldwin had made sure it could still rely on the

Made in 1958, this 6117 Double Anniversary has a sunburst finish and a Space Control roller bridge

A 1964 double-cutaway Country Gentleman: George Harrison played a similar one made in '62

(Left to right) A 1971 Roc Jet, a 1966 Corvette 'Gold Duke' and a 1977 Chet Atkins Super Axe

services of Chet Atkins – a good opportunity, the company surmised, to try to generate some new top-line models. So, along came the Super Chet (fussy inlays and thumbwheel controls along the scratchplate edge), the Deluxe Chet (a simpler version of the same design) and, in 1977, the Chet Atkins Super Axe (crammed full of effects, including compression and phasing).

Alas, the sound of reverberating applause – even for models where Baldwin was obviously trying its best – was strangely absent. Worse still was the reception for the Roc Jet (Duo Jet influenced, but again marred by inappropriate electronics) and a range of really quite leftfield bolt-on solid models such as the Committee, the Beast and the TK300. How long could the company hang on? The answer was until 1981. The remaining stock was sold off and Chet Atkins began talking to Gibson about new signature guitars. It seemed as if the story was over.

But it would be another member of the same family, Fred #3 – a nephew of Fred Jr, who had sold the company to Baldwin – who would bring Gretsch back. Alongside with Duke Kramer, the original Gretsch salesman, Fred planned a whole new line of fine guitars. Unfortunately, the company had no factory. Ancient rivals Gibson declined to make the new guitars. So did Guild. So did Heritage. So Fred took off to Japan, and found a well-established company, Terada, that was used to making semi-acoustic guitars. The reissues hit the streets in 1989 to surprised acclaim. Although not 100-per-cent-accurate vintage reissues, each of the models in the initial six-strong semi-acoustic and four-strong solidbody line-up was well put together – competing, you could argue, with Gibson, that was just starting to pull out of its 1980s rut.

## Rude health

In late 2002, Gretsch signed an agreement with Fender giving The Big F the reins when it came to manufacturing, distributing and marketing Gretsch guitars and basses. Though the Gretsch company still owns the name, under Fender's watchful eye the brand has flourished, with models to suit every pocket, from the entry-level Streamliners (review on p78) and mid-priced Electromatics to the simply wonderful Custom Shop instruments overseen in Corona by Senior Master Builder Stephen Stern (turn to p18 to see our interview and Custom Shop tour). Meanwhile, the Terada factory in Nagoya, Japan still handles production of Gretsch's Professional Collection instruments, which were split into two distinct reissue (Vintage Select Edition) and modern player-friendly (Players Edition) strands at Winter NAMM 2016. The vibe is every bit as 'Hollywood' as it ever was, but both the playing experience and build is better than ever. Twang-tastic.

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# Master Craft

The Gretsch Custom Shop in California is responsible for some of the world's most desirable instruments. *G&B* gets the tour from its head honcho Stephen Stern

Story **Chris Vinnicombe** | Photography **Eleanor Jane**

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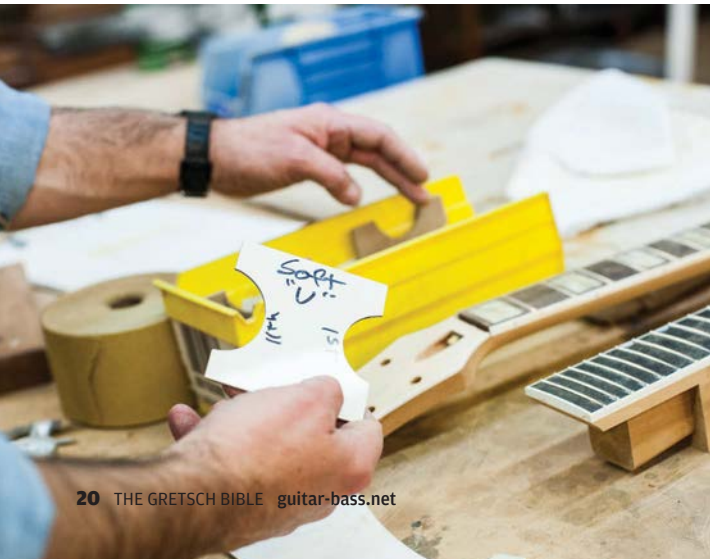

*Above* **The Gretsch Custom Shop team (L-R): Tony Corona (buffing, relic'ing, paint detail, touch-up), Stephen Stern (neck shaping, inspection, training), Gonzalo Madrigal (builds bodies, fits necks, binding), Chad Henrichsen (makes neck assemblies), Andy Hicks (assembly and set-up, relics parts)**

About 50 miles east of Downtown Los Angeles lies the city of Corona. Once hailed as the 'lemon capital of the world', these days this sun-kissed corner of Southern California is home to the Fender factory, Custom Shop and Visitor Center. While an impressive production line sees hundreds of Fender guitars and basses leave the factory every day, via an unassuming staircase in the corner of the Custom Shop, we are transported to another, very different world.

Above the Fender Custom Shop, housed in a small workshop, Senior Master Builder Stephen Stern leads a team of five in the creation of the most remarkable musical instruments ever to bear the Gretsch logo. Those of you lucky enough to own a Gretsch Custom Shop guitar will be few in number; Stern oversees the build of just a handful of instruments every month and current wait times range from 24 to 36 months.

Stern's client list includes some of the biggest names in roots and rock 'n' roll music but, like many of the leading luthiers of the modern age, he cut his guitar-building teeth at the dawn of the age of shred: "I started in 1979 or '80 with Charvel/Jackson. I worked with them in San Dimas for about five years. I had woodworking knowledge because I apprenticed at a custom furniture shop for five years. I wanted to learn set up and assembly and the wiring and that, so I got a job in that department."

*"I had my own furniture shop and it kind of came to a crossroads; it was, either we get serious and invest a lot of money or get out"*

## Right place, right time

We suspect that it must have been exciting to be involved in a scene that was about to explode. "Oh yeah, it was really good timing," Stern acknowledges. "But after about five years I left Charvel – it wasn't working out too well, we had some disagreements, you might say! – not really knowing any other places to go, so I went back into cabinet and furniture making.

"Then I had my own furniture shop and it kind of came to a crossroads; I had a partner and it was, either we get serious and invest a lot of money or get out. And I'd started a rock band and was getting more interested in guitars, and I'd heard about the Fender Custom Shop. I went to a NAMM Show in 1993 and the thought of working in a custom shop not on a production line really appealed to me.

"I got a résumé together and contacted the guy who ran the shop, called about three or four times for an interview and the secretary finally said, oh John [Page] wants you to come down for an interview. So I got hired in '93 and they were bringing the D'Aquisto model from Japan into the Custom Shop. So he asked me if I'd like to be >

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involved with that, and I said sure, absolutely.

"I was going to work under a guy from Gibson, and he was supposed to start in June or July. I started in May. So when I first started I was just building benches for the shop! They had moved into this new building and they weren't quite set up. I was just waiting for this guy to come.

"John came to me at the end of June and he said, 'oh, the guy decided to stay with Gibson', he said 'okay, this is your baby'. I'd never made an archtop before! Fortunately I had good woodworking skills, so I got in contact with Jimmy D'Aquisto and we talked over the phone and he sent me drawings and stuff, and that's how it started."

Stern agrees that the construction of most classic Gretsch models has much in common with the jazz tradition – even the Duo Jet is arguably closer to a scaled-down archtop than it is a Les Paul: "Oh, yeah. If you look at the Duo Jet, it's pretty much based off of that type of guitar."

However, after D'Aquisto, Stern would be involved in the production of jazz instruments under another brand before being given the Gretsch gig: "In 2005 I was doing the Benedettos upstairs and the Gretsch Custom Shop was just two models, it was being run by a couple other people, it wasn't like a designated thing. The management decided to incorporate those models in with Benedetto, so it passed over to me.

*"In 2008 I got a few orders for some Penguins and Duo Jets. We did a dealer show at the factory and it was a big hit, so things just kind of took off from there"*

"We had a '55 White Falcon and a '55 6120. Then we started doing a few tribute models and things, but it kind of slowed down for a little while. I didn't have a crew anymore, it was just me, and maybe one other guy. Around 2008, I got a few orders for some Penguins and Duo Jets, and we did a dealer show at the factory and we had a big display and it was a big hit, so things just kind of took off from there."

Just a few days before our visit, Team *G&B* attended the 2016 Winter NAMM show in nearby Anaheim and couldn't help noticing that Gretsch seems to be a higher priority for Fender than ever before, with a range of big new launches at the show.

"You can attribute that to Joe Carducci," agrees Stern. "He does a fantastic job with the marketing, coming up with new ideas and things. Mike Lewis got the ball rolling, updating all the models, getting the quality up, the specs up to standard. Then Joe took over from Mike."

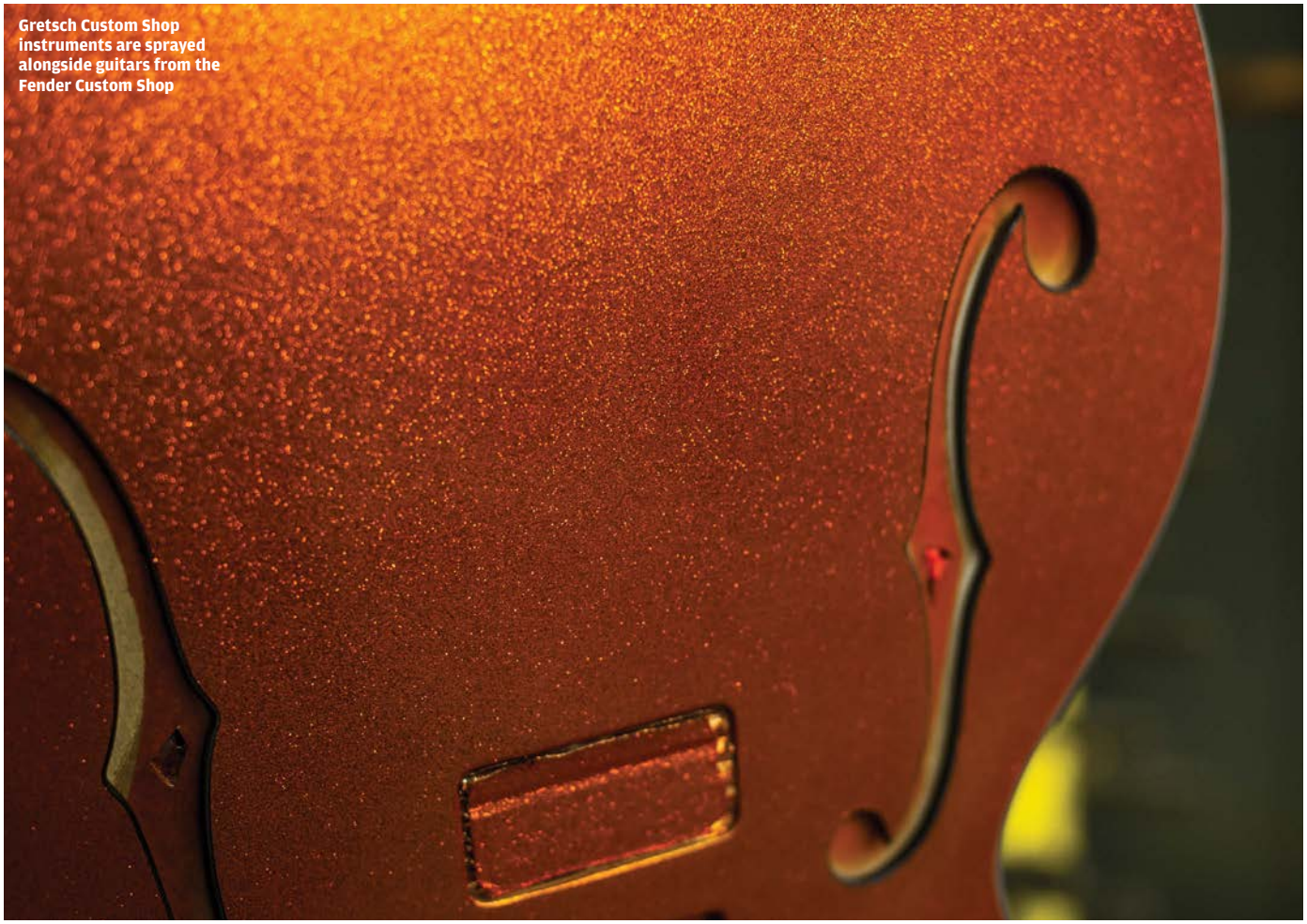
## Star guitars

Stern himself has contributed much to the Gretsch allure in recent years, not least with his team's painstaking recreations of some of the most important guitars in the history of rock 'n' >

*Opposite page* **Stephen Stern shapes all of the Gretsch Custom Shop necks: "We have a standard, stock C and we have a fatter C. I have one dealer, that's all he wants. He likes those fatter necks. There are some other shapes we use, like a soft V. When I first took over the shop, the Falcons had a D shape. There was a lot of shoulder. I didn't like it, so I changed it!"**

**"The turquoise sparkle 6120 is a drum wrap. I contacted the Gretsch drum company and I said, 'show me all of the sparkles you have'. So I ordered five or six of them..."**

**A killer Double Cut Jet with aged hardware on the way to get the relic treatment on its neck and body**



**Gretsch Custom Shop instruments are sprayed alongside guitars from the Fender Custom Shop**

*Opposite page* **The Melita Synchro-Sonic bridge is the latest piece of hardware that Stern has tweaked in the interests of vintage-accuracy: "I've pretty much changed over all the parts so they are vintage -correct. The last one was the Synchro-Sonic bridge..."**

roll, including George Harrison's Duo Jet and Eddie Cochran's 6120. The process naturally involves getting up close and personal with the instruments in question. They are iconic guitars and when you think about the history, it's quite an honour," says Stern.

"You have to kind of set that aside and focus on the job at hand, getting all the details correct. It's quite nerve-wracking! The Eddie Cochran guitar was at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame – it's still owned by the family and they didn't want to release it. So I went and spent a couple of days there. The Brian Setzer guitar, we had at the shop. The George Harrison guitar had its own plane seat! It was an exciting project but very nerve-wracking."

## Under wraps

The guitar on which George played the thrilling lead lines on *I Saw Her Standing There* probably deserves its own aircraft, let alone its own seat. When we ask which celebrity six-string is next for the Custom Shop tribute treatment, Stern smiles but keeps his hand close to his chest: "We have something coming up that I can't talk about!"

The process of replicating historic instruments has helped make all of the Gretsch Custom Shop's new instruments more vintage-accurate: "In 2009, I went back to Nashville to spec out Duane Eddy's original 6120 for the signature model," Stern remembers. "I told Joe Carducci, hey I'd like to go Savannah [the Georgia location of the Gretsch Company HQ] too to spec out some guitars because they had the Bachman collection.

*"The Brian Setzer guitar, we had at the shop. The George Harrison guitar had its own plane seat! It was very nerve-wracking"*

"I have a book containing all of the guitars that are in the collection; I picked out certain models that I wanted to take measurements of and recreate. I went back there and spent two days taking notes and measurements. With the tribute guitars we've done, you pick up a lot of details of parts. For example, when I took over the Shop, the White Falcon just had a black plastic pickup spacer. You look at the old Gretsches, they are clear plastic and they painted gold on one side, just like the pickguard. So that's something we changed out. It's those little details..."

It's those little details that matter, all right, and in the hands of Stern and his team, the details consistently seem to add up to a whole that's achingly, heartbreakingly cool. Just ask Brian Setzer, Nalle Colt, Steve Miller, Duane Eddy...

***For more on the Gretsch Custom Shop, visit gretschguitars.com/features/customshop***

# Love At First Sight

Richard Hawley has adored vintage Gretsches since first clapping eyes on one as a child. Four decades on, the British guitar star is still a fully paid-up Gretsch addict. He tells us how it all started

Story **Gary Walker** Instrument and live photography **Eleanor Jane**

Richard Hawley still remembers the intoxicating, life-altering effect of seeing his first Gretsch. One of the nation's finest songwriters, former Longpigs and Pulp guitarist and among the city of Sheffield's most beloved sons, he has since amassed a collection numbering "35 to 40". Yet he can recall instantly those first glimpses of the arcing curves, f-holes and inviting Bigsby vibrato arm that whetted his youthful appetite.

"It was Duane Eddy and Eddie Cochran on LP sleeves that my dad had," Hawley remembers. "*The Twangs The Thang*. Eddie Cochran's first album, *Singin' To My Baby*... and Cliff Gallup too, with Gene Vincent, that picture of him playing the Duo Jet. That was really early on, and then making that connection between the sound of those guitars from the record and the actual visual side of it."

Hawley's first experience of the Gretsch sound – the twang of Eddy's Chet Atkins beamed across the Atlantic from the sun-scorched wide-open spaces of Arizona to the Hawleys' Yorkshire living room – still resonates, too: "Its richness, it'd got a sort of clippy, high overtone to it, but this really deep... I always thought Duane Eddy must detune his guitars and have strings like bull rope, and it was only many, many years later that I found out that is so far from the truth it's ridiculous.

"I was glued to a guitar from really early on. My early guitars were things like Hondo IIs, and I think I had a Columbus Les Paul copy, and then I managed to save up from my paper round for a Hofner President that had a Bigsby tremolo arm on, but all those guitars you could have used the bass E string for a fucking strap. They were utter pigs to play.

"I had an Eko 12-string that one of my uncles gave me, and I took all the octave strings off and played it as a six-string. That was the only thing I had that vaguely resembled a guitar rather than a cricket bat."

That all changed one day in 1983 when Hawley's father, having been made redundant by one of the many steelworks that gave Sheffield its 'steel city' moniker, came home with a present that altered the course of his teenage son's life.

"He had a choice between paying Everest double glazing off with his redundancy or buying his son his first proper guitar, and thanks to my dad, he chose the latter," remembers Hawley. "It was a Gretsch Country Gent and it cost £290.

"All my guitars disappeared one day. I came home from school looking for my guitars and thinking, 'where the fuck have they gone?!' Dad had been through hell and high water at the steelworks, being on strike and this, that and the other, and must have thought 'fuck it, I'm going to get something nice'. I used that guitar for every band I was in, from being a teenager right up until the week before I joined the Longpigs, when it got stolen. I never got it back.

"I'd love to get that Country Gent back because dad gave it to me. He wrote on it in ultraviolet pen the original postcode, which was S5 6WB, I still remember it."

From being an admiring childhood Duane Eddy fan, spellbound in front of the record player, the trajectory of Hawley's life, through his seven years in Longpigs during the giddy 90s whirl of Britpop and playing live with best mate Jarvis Cocker in Pulp, to a solo career that spans seven albums and Brit Award and Mercury Music Prize nominations, brought him shoulder to shoulder with Eddy. They are now firm friends and collaborators who have often toured together, while Hawley, who has described the 78-year-old as "one of the best guitar players that ever walked the earth", produced Eddy's 2011 album, *Road Trip*.

> "In the last few years, I've acquired a '56 6120 and a '57 6120. They're like two arms to me"

Hawley's Jaguar Tan Gretsch G6118T-LTV 125th Anniversary

"I've owned a lot of Gretsches and one of the ones that's really precious to me is one that was given to me by Duane Eddy," he says. "When I was working with Duane we did a load of touring together and spent a lot of time together, and Fred Gretsch and his wife Dinah came over from America when Duane was on tour and delivered to him the Duane Eddy Gretsch [6120DE] signature models.

"I was sat with Duane at the Royal Festival Hall backstage, he'd just been delivered them – serial number 001 and 002 – and we sat playing them together, which was beyond a joy to me, as you can imagine, not just because of the guitars but because Duane is a beautiful human being to spend time with, and a great teacher and listener who's full of funny stories.

"I remember at the end of the tour putting his guitars in the boot of his car, and he turned round and said 'what are you doing?'. I said 'putting the guitars in the boot of the car', and he said, 'oh no, there's only one going in the boot of the car, the other's yours'. He gave it to me, and that's very precious to me.

"In the last few years, I've acquired a 1956 6120 and a 1957 6120, with the branded G. They're like two arms to me, basically. I very rarely put them down."

The Country Gent has remained one of Hawley's favourite Gretsch models, too, despite the theft of his original.

"On my track, *Open Up Your Door*, the solo on that was played using the Country Gent that replaced the one that got stolen. I was so gutted my dad's got stolen that when I joined the Longpigs and we got signed, they bought me a Country Gent to replace it, a '65. The one of my dad's was a '63 with the pyramid-step machineheads and the split dampers, not like a single bar.

"I've got a 1948 Gretsch Synchromatic acoustic, an archtop jazz guitar, and I love that very much, I play it shitloads and write a lot of songs on it. I've got a 6196T, a Country Club – a Cadillac Green one that I bought for peanuts. It's a modern Japanese guitar and it's fucking awesome. Purists probably don't like them much, but those Japanese guitars are made with precision and, to be honest, are better than a lot of the vintage stuff, because back in the day, if you were looking for a vintage Gretsch, in the 80s and 90s, you could pick them up for a song.

> "I've owned a lot of Gretsches and one that's really precious to me was given to me by Duane Eddy"

"You could have 10 vintage Gretsches in a line and there'd only be one that was any good. There's a lot of myths about Gretsches and a lot of them were poorly assembled, I hate to say it, but they were; but when you got a good one, fuck me... amazing. I've got a lot that are very important to me.

"I've got my Gretsch 12-string, the blonde one. They're real fuckers those guitars, because the headstock makes them unbalanced. They tip slightly forward and it's a pain in the arse because when you're playing, you're having to lift the neck. Now I've got a Heistercamp strap on it, it just sits on my shoulders and I can put my arms by my side and it doesn't move."

Hawley is famed for the glorious, widescreen high-gain sound that characterised his dense, brooding 2012 masterpiece *Standing At The Sky's Edge*, and his live shows, powered by a formidable amp setup comprising two Fender Hot Rod Deluxes, a Fender Super-Sonic and a Blackstar Artisan, are scintillating experiences, rich with expertly marshalled feedback and gratuitous Bigsby action.

When asked what advice he would give Gretsch owners trying to manage the heady combination of vintage-era hollowbody guitars and high gain on smaller stages, he replies with a hearty laugh: "One way of dealing with the feedback is don't stop playing! Don't leave any gaps in your playing, and then you won't get the whistling.

"The other is to realise that what you're holding is almost a full-acoustic instrument that's got air in between. It's not got all those things that a solidbody has got, which were >

Hawley on stage with Duane Eddy at The Leadmill in Sheffield

Kevin Wells

**Hawley's '65 Country Gent (left) and '63 Tennessean pictured with a vintage Fender Tremolux**

designed by Les Paul and Leo Fender to combat that by having maximum sustain from a solid block of wood.

"It's all to do with where you stand in the room. It's not just playing the guitar; what you have to get good at is finding that sweet spot. You've got an acoustic instrument, effectively, with pickups on, and it will do things that are just amazing, but people have tried to eradicate those things. They're the things I like – the odd notes that will pop out with sustain and feedback.

"It's learning to control that with the acoustic nature of the guitar and moving around to find that sweet spot. Sometimes when you stand sideways-on and you've got the back of the guitar facing the amp, and you lean it on the floor and tilt the guitar backwards and forwards, you get all those mad sustained notes out of it, and I've always loved that shit."

Like many Gretsch owners, Hawley sees the instruments' quirks as something to embrace rather than correct: "I've got a Gretsch Tennessean, a '63, that I used shitloads when I played with Pulp, and that's got painted-on f-holes because it was one of those design things where they tried to combat the feedback, but it still happens anyway. It's a bit like punk-rock, being able to play three chords was turned into an asset, not a drawback. Gretsch guitars, you can have gates and this and that, and use compressors and whatever else to stop it, but in a way, that defies the object of having a Gretsch because you make it a bit more normal. The beauty of them is you get that mad shit. That sustain and the type of feedback is like no other type of guitar. They're beautiful.

> "The beauty is you get that mad shit. That sustain and feedback is like no other type of guitar"

"On a more gentle level, if you try using a little bit of reverb and a lengthy-ish echo, not a digital echo, and put a compressor on, middle pickup... fuck me, what a sound. You get a lot of the sustain, with a cleaner sort of sound, but it still works like that. I always use a Bigsby. I own some guitars that don't have Bigsbys but I very rarely use them, because I use the wobble on it to help with the sustain of the note."

While the legendary status of Gretsch guitars is assured, the company's amps are lesser-appreciated. Yet Hawley is both a fan and an avid collector.

"I've got a '63 Chet Atkins one, it's got a really unique tremolo on, I can't even describe it," he says. "There's two amps in the world I've played, and I own both of them... one is an old 50s Magnatone, the tremolo on it, I can't even describe. There's the old Bo Diddley tremolo sound that's like nothing else, and Buddy Holly's as well... it's really unusual, almost like a phaser, a Phase 90 when you ran it all the way up... These Gretsch Chet Atkins amps had a tremolo where your playing triggers the tremolo rather than it being on/off, and it's really unique. They're amazing, and Gretsch amps are very underrated."

For Hawley, the classic electric guitar formula, honed between the mid 50s and late 1960s, has never been bettered.

"The problem with a lot of name guitars is the truth of the matter is they got it right in the first place," he says, "and whatever it is – Fender, Gibson... the genius of the original design of those guitars has been farted around with so much to appeal to a new audience or new types of players, and actually an old Duo Jet, you can do so much with that. You don't need to fuck about with that, it's like mending what isn't broken. There have been tweaks along the way but a lot of those beautiful guitars by the time they got to the mid- to late-

**Hawley's Gretsch 6120 Nashville Chet Atkins**

-60s it was perfect. Here's irony for you, when the v word came about – vintage – everyone started looking over their shoulders, saying 'hold on a second, wasn't it really great back then?' And they went back to square one.

"Like I was saying with the 6196T, it's a Japanese-made modern guitar that's made with the aesthetics and technology from the 50s and 60s but with all the skills of modern guitar making. Those guitars are fucking amazing!"

While extending the lineage of iconic Gretsch players such as Cochran and Eddy, Hawley more than perhaps any modern-day player has taken the brand's famous tone into new sonic realms. Indeed, he dismisses what has become something of a cliché that Gretsch guitars are capable of producing only rockabilly sounds as "bullshit". Despite this close association, however, he says he's in no hurry to work on a signature model.

"Maybe there's a conversation to be had," he considers, "but I'm not in a big rush to do something like that. I'm quite happy playing things without my name on, because it's got the Gretsch name on it, and what more do you want than that? I do own some signature models – Chet Atkins, Duane Eddy – and they're master players, and I'm quite happy to just be someone who plays these beautiful guitars."

# Guitar Man

Few artists epitomise the famous Gretsch twang more than Duane Eddy. *G&B* meets one of the world's most influential guitarists to talk 6120s, Chet Atkins and legendary signature models

Story **Michael Stephens**

Guitar Man. Mr Twang. The Rebel Rouser. The Titan Of Twang. From his nicknames alone, it's pretty clear what you're getting from the legendary Duane Eddy. Although there were guitar heroes before him, New York-born Eddy was pretty much the first to turn guitar instrumentals into huge hits. And, unlike modern-day fret noodlers such as Steve Vai and Joe Satriani, you could actually dance to Eddy's hits.

The influence of early songs such as *Rebel Rouser* (1958), *Peter Gunn* ('59), and *Because They're Young* ('60) was huge. The Kinks' Dave Davies says: "Chet Atkins used vibrato in a selective way – Duane Eddy used it to thrash the music." Creedence Clearwater Revival's John Fogerty reckons, "Duane Eddy was the front guy, the first rock 'n' roll guitar god."

Hank Marvin, Bruce Springsteen, John Entwistle, Adrian Belew, Steve Howe, Richard Thompson, Roger McGuinn, Phil Manzanera, Bill Nelson, Mark Knopfler, and even film composer Ennio Morricone have credited Eddy with firing their six-string imaginations. He went on to collaborate with artists as diverse as Phil Everly, Waylon Jennings, George Harrison, Paul McCartney, Jeff Lynne, Ry Cooder, The Art Of Noise and Richard Hawley. But Eddy's most famous of friends along the way? His Gretsch 6120.

## Birth of the twang

Although he was born in New York, the young Duane Eddy's family later relocated to Arizona, where Eddy graduated from Coolidge City High School. "I started on acoustic, aged five," Duane remembers of his guitar origins. "I got my first electric in '53 or '54, a Gibson Les Paul Goldtop that I used for a couple of years, when we were in Arizona."

As a teen, Eddy was soon working the clubs of Phoenix, with his family south east in Coolidge. He was raised on country music and rock 'n' roll, with Chet Atkins and Merle Travis his heroes, appearing with Jimmy Delbridge in a duo and with Buddy Long's Western Melody Boys. He and Delbridge cut one single, *Soda Fountain Girl*, in 1956, but everything changed for Duane a year later...

"I went into Ziggie's Music store in Phoenix, just to look at guitars," he recalls. "I wasn't going to buy one. I tried a Gretsch White Falcon, gorgeous guitar but with a neck like a baseball bat. It didn't play as good as my Gibson, to me. But Ziggie says, 'I got something else here you might like a little better'. And it was the 6120. It just nestled into me so sweetly, and this neck was a dream. Best neck ever.

"I thanked Ziggie Zardus [Ziggie sold guitars? – Ed] and got up to leave and he says, 'Have you got your own guitar with you?' 'Yeah,' I say, 'it's in the trunk of my car'. I bring it in and show him the Goldtop, and Ziggie says, 'I can give you $65 off the 6120 for it'. But I couldn't. The 6120 was $450. I told him, 'I can't afford it and I'm not old enough to get credit, and my dad would have to sign for me... and he's 60 miles away for a couple of weeks. Maybe I'll come back when my dad gets back'.

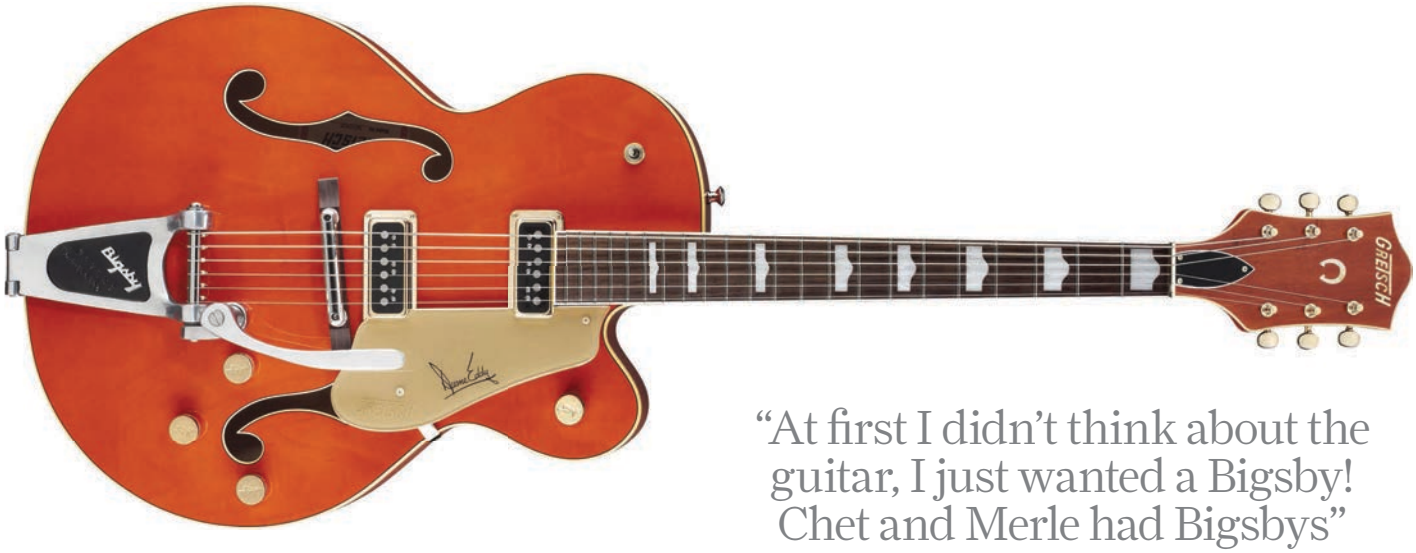
"So I make to leave with my Goldtop, but Ziggie's still saying, 'Why are you taking that guitar? Take the Gretsch. Your dad can sign when he has the time'. I tell you, I went home a very happy camper that day."

> "The 6120 just nestled into me so sweetly, and this neck was a dream. Best neck ever"

Eddy explains that it was, in all honesty, purely the 6120's Bigsby vibrato tailpiece that drew him into the wonderful world of Gretsch: "That's what I wanted more than anything and Gibson didn't have them, or I'd certainly never seen one in 1957. So, at first I didn't think about the guitar itself so much, I just wanted a Bigsby! Chet and Merle had Bigsbys.

"But, boy, it changed my life. I started recording that year. In '58 I did *Movin' And Groovin'*, then *Rebel Rouser*... and the rest is history, as they say. Though I still was making the payments of $17.50 a month >

**Duane with his Gretsch 6120DE signature model**



"At first I didn't think about the guitar, I just wanted a Bigsby! Chet and Merle had Bigsbys"

up until the years of the end of my first hits. Ridiculous. So a few years on, I walked back in to Ziggie's one day and paid it off!"

### Eddy's Atkins diet

Duane Eddy first met Chet Atkins, who was also Gretsch design consultant across its range from 1955 to 1980, back in '59 and recorded his own super-twang version of Chet staple *Trambone* in 1961. In Chet's later years, with Eddy living in Nashville, the two became regular lunch partners, though rarely studio collaborators. "It's funny," remembers Duane, "In 2000 or so, we did play together... and I played *Trambone*...

"He said, 'Man, you play that stuff with a lot of balls'. I don't play it smooth or beautiful like Chet. Not even as smooth as Merle. I just drive it. It's rock 'n' roll. Like Elvis said, rock 'n' roll is just 'hopped-up country music', back when 'hopped-up' meant a more innocent thing. I just told him it took me a lot of guts to play it in front of him, and he laughed. We were close friends. Even after Chet had a stroke, I'd drive him out for lunch and I'd ask him a lot of questions. He produced so many great records, more than you can imagine – great stories.

"Chet talked about the 'kerosene circuit' – 40s shows up in east Tennessee, where they'd play acoustic shows in towns with no electricity. The whole place was run on kerosene lamps! I'm happy to say they've got electricity up there now."

During those leisurely lunches, there was, of course, plenty of Gretsch talk. And Eddy even learned something new: "Mine is a 1957 6120 Chet Atkins model, stock. It had the [single-coil] DeArmond Dynasonic pickups, although Chet didn't like those pickups at all. At lunch one day, Chet said, 'I hated those things! Once we got the [Filter'Tron] humbuckers [from 1958], I was okay. But they worked okay for you, Duane!' That was sweet of Chet. Dynasonics aren't pretty, and they sure do hum.

"On my early records, just before we come in, you can hear the buzz. Chet once asked me what kind of strings I'd been using, as he seemed baffled by my sound, and I said 'Chet Atkins Medium Gauge! I did everything like you, Chet... except play like you'. He laughed. That was another nice moment. But up to then, and this was years later, I didn't even know Chet didn't like those pickups."

### Duane Eddy's signature sound: the Gretsch 6120DE

With Eddy going on to be hailed as one of Gretsch's primo pickers, the introduction of a signature model was inevitable. Gretsch 6120s have undergone subtle changes over the years, so for the current Gretsch 6120DE, he wanted the company to re-bottle the magic of his original '57 but improve on it, too. It was a painstaking process for the Gretsch Custom Shop team, led by Master Builder Stephen Stern.

"Stephen came here to Nashville with his team and measured my original '57," explains Eddy. "They measured everything, right down to the tuners. One thing they discovered is the body is an eighth of an inch deeper on my '57 than the modern 6120s. They didn't know why. But for my signature model, it's got that extra depth back. It's also got the brass nut, like my original; the same-sounding Dynasonic pickups. It's a different process now, they don't hum as much, but they sound the same, so they're better. Don't ask me to explain the process: I don't understand all that stuff!

"But I changed other things. The bridge is by Tru-Arc, made by Tim Harman up in Kentucky. It's heavier than a Gretsch bridge and gives a little more sustain. I've the chrome one, but he makes a brass one, too. They have different tones. But I've compared the sound to my original '57, and I honestly can't tell the difference.

"The Bigsby is different to modern Gretsches, too. Fred Gretsch III bought the [Ted McCarty] company who made Bigsbys, and they found all these old machines and moulds. And they found the mould for the vibrato arm on my '57, which they didn't make anymore. But they started again, with the different arm. They called it the Duane Eddy Handle. And the pins holding the strings onto the tailpiece are longer. They just make re-stringing easier, as strings on a Bigsby can often pop out mid-change. There are other little things, like the straplock holders.

"The first prototype of my 6120DE had a neck as slim as my '57, but the production prototype they later sent over to Nashville didn't. I let it go because I thought, 'well, not everyone might like this slim neck'. But after >

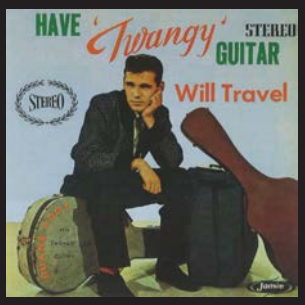
Eddy at home with black and white versions of his 6120 signature model

Duane Eddy playing at the MusiCares Paul McCartney tribute in 2012

# HAVE TWANGY GUITAR WILL TRAVEL

With such a unique sound, Duane Eddy was never going to be a jobbing session musician, but over the decades he's been in numerous twangy collaborations with trusty Gretsches by his side...

## Duane Eddy And The Ventures




Eddy's style was hugely influential on the burgeoning surf-guitar scene of the early 60s – he even cut his own *Surfin'* album in '63 – and was later invited to guest with The Ventures on rare instro-twang cuts such as *I Fought The Law* and *Spanish Armada*.

"I was flattered," he says. "I know that *Movin' And Groovin'* was a big record for the surf bands, but they didn't sound the same, not really. They did a lot on the guitar in the midrange/high range and the sound was much thinner. Everyone's different. They didn't get down to the low range as much as me, but they credited me with starting that stuff, so... that's fine, I can hardly get mad. They were fun sessions."

## The Art Of Noise

A collaboration suggested by Eddy's producer friend Eddy Pumer, an electro-pop tinged version of *Peter Gunn* won a Grammy in '86 for Best Rock Instrumental Performance.

"All collaborations are different," says Eddy. "The Art Of Noise were pretty bizarre – doing great on the dancefloor, but their label couldn't get them into the mainstream. I was suggested.

"They'd done the *Peter Gunn* backing track and I flew over to London and put my guitar on it. But it wasn't my 6120. It was my green '55 Gretsch Country Club. I'd traded that with Al Casey [co-writer of Duane's *Ramrod*], because he wanted one of the banjos I used on my folk album, *Songs Of Our Heritage*.

"Al had played that Gretsch on Sanford Clark's *The Fool* and Jody Reynolds' *Endless Sleep*. But, after I got it, that was the Art Of Noise guitar for *Peter Gunn*. That Gretsch Country Club is now in Nashville's Musicians Hall Of Fame.

"I didn't want to take a chance flying over with my '57 6120. In the business, Heathrow then was known as 'thief row' because they kept losing so many guitars [laughs]... also, the Country Club had the closest sound to my 6120. I figured with all the digital recording The Art Of Noise were using, it wouldn't make much difference. And it didn't."

## Richard Hawley

*Road Trip* (2011) was credited as an Eddy solo album, but impetus came from Richard Hawley, who co-produced/co-wrote many tracks. It was recorded in Sheffield "the old way" to rave reviews and Eddy has since recruited Hawley's band for live shows.

He says: "I don't know sales figures on it – could be six, 6,000 or 600,000! But the reviews were great – some were better to read than the album itself – and it was high on the Amazon charts for a while. That wasn't my '57 6120, it was the prototype 6120DE. I can't tell you how good that prototype is, it's identical. I really enjoyed this. Richard's a great guy."

## Future twang...

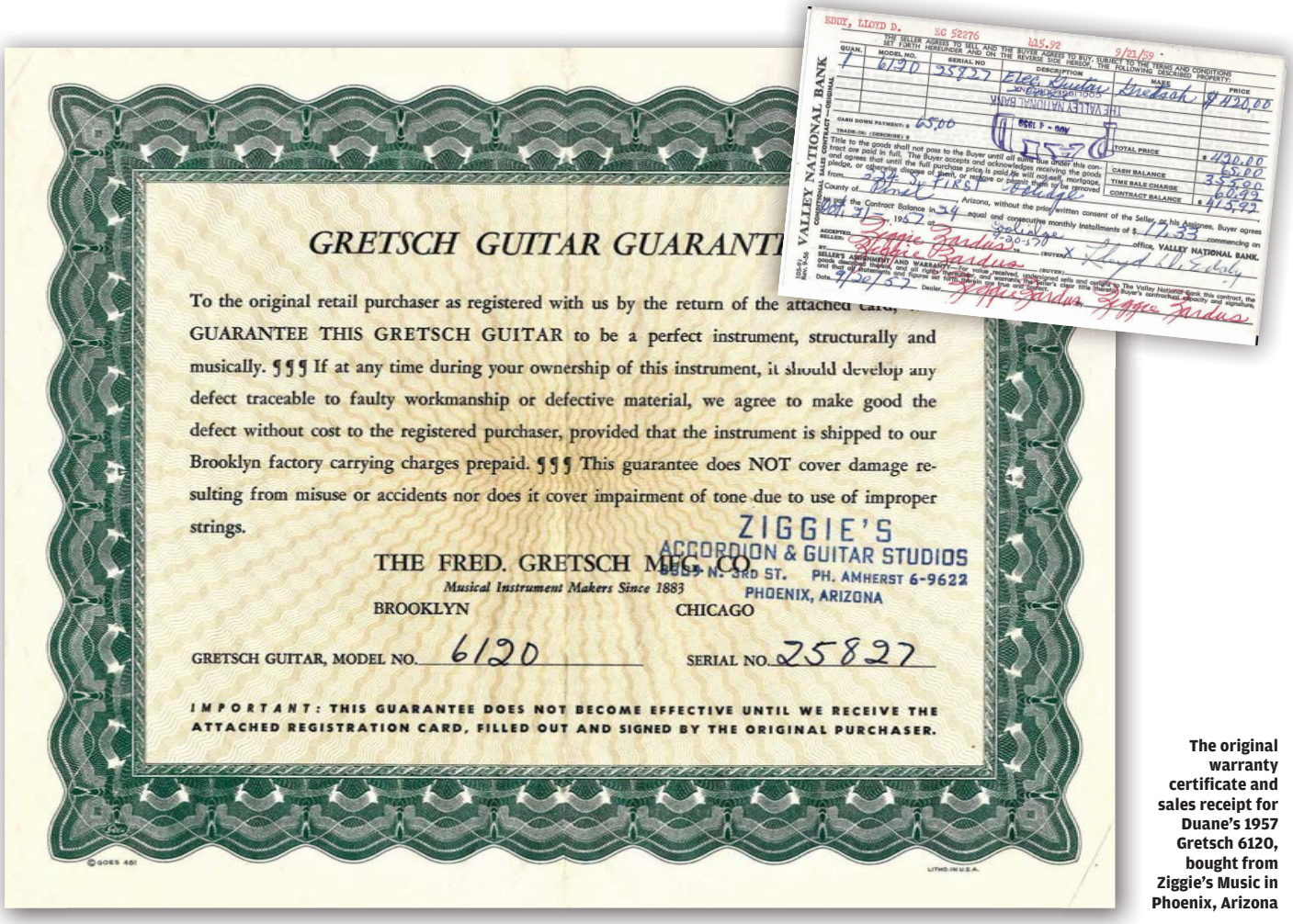
Although now 78, Eddy is still very much active and remains in demand for a number of collaborations.

"I'm not sure about a solo album right now, but I'm not winding down," he vows. "I got to be [late Nashville A-Team sessioneer] Grady Martin for a day when he was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame (2015). I used my Gretsch six-string bass on that. I did the 2015 Tribute To Les Paul show here in Nashville.

"I did a track just the other day with Steve Wariner, Chet's protégé. Steve is only the seventh CGP [Certified Guitar Player] ever and he's great to play with. I'm playing on his next album.

"I may be writing with The Black Keys' Dan Auerbach soon. He and I have become friends... we'll see how it goes. And I've been writing with Mickey Raphael, harmonica player with Willie Nelson. People keep calling me! The Country Music Hall of Fame have just made a two-hour video retrospective on my career, and that involved some live things. I'm not making a lot of money, but I'm having a lot of fun."

**Eddy playing the six-string bass built for him by the Gretsch Custom Shop's Stephen Stern**



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TRADE-IN: (DESCRIBE) $
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The original warranty certificate and sales receipt for Duane's 1957 Gretsch 6120, bought from Ziggie's Music in Phoenix, Arizona

some discussions, we found that everyone did love it. So we went back to the very thin profile of my '57. It's the slimmest profile of any neck in the Gretsch line-up.

"These things were all compared closely to my original '57. I wanted any signature to be as close as possible, if only for me."

## Even better than the real thing

Unlike many a signature guitar artist, Eddy is true to the refinements of his DE signature. "I may use my '57 on a few special occasions, but it's the 6120DE for me now," he says. The original is exhibited in the Scottsdale Musical Instrument Museum, "in a big plexiglass case, insured for one million dollars, all that. I don't think even I'm allowed to take it out!" The pickups are fading after 59 years and, anyway, Eddy prefers his new Dynasonics. He's just happy the guitar is still around at all.

"It nearly got stolen once," he says. "We were playing South Carolina, this colosseum-type place. Behind the stage, there was just a big space with stage doors leading to outside. After the show, a lot of the kids just wandered backstage and I sat down with the 6120 between my legs, signing autographs and everything. Eventually, we had to go and my road manager asked me if I was missing anything. 'Not that I know of,' I said. I looked down and... my guitar was gone! I nearly had a heart attack. The singer Fabian, who was also on the bill, stopped the guy who'd tried to steal it.

> "Did I have other 6120s? Naah. That was it! Who could afford more than one? It was the 50s"

A young Eddy in early Gretsch action

Fabian was a rock 'n' roll star back then – wasn't the greatest singer, but he was so good-looking it didn't matter! He apprehended this kid with my guitar just as he was heading out the stage door. The kid dropped my 6120 and ran. Fabian said he had the choice of chasing the kid or bringing my guitar back. He chose the right option.

"Did I have other 6120s? Naaah. That was it! Who could afford more than one? It was the mid-50s, remember. Basically, if you hear a record of mine, it's that '57 guitar. Up until *Road Trip* [2011]."

Eddy's next plans are to expand the 6120DE line. There's set to be a 6120DE in Pearl White with tortoiseshell binding: "outstandingly beautiful", and an aged Midnight Black with pearl binding: "It looks like old ivory." The new models are due for release later this year.

Eddy also enthuses about a six-string bass made especially for him by the Gretsch Custom Shop's Stephen Stern: "It's just awesome. It's Candy Apple Black – you can 'see' into the black – with white binding and a longer-scale neck on the double-cutaway body of a Gretsch bass. It's slimmer than my 6120, but it has a Bigsby on it, of course. Everyone who's seen and played it recently – Steve Wariner, Buddy Miller, Ry Cooder just recently – just loves it."

# BETTER CALL PAUL

As a sessioneer *par excellence* and Gretsch demonstrator and clinician, Paul Pigat has played a few nice Gretsches in his time. *G&B* catches up with him

Story **Huw Price**

As guitarists go, Paul Pigat is something of a polymath. Classically trained, he has gone on to forge a formidable reputation as a roots, rockabilly, swing and jazz player. He has backed up stars including Jakob Dylan and Neko Case, played with legends such as Albert Lee and James Burton, performed as a solo artist, and is the bandleader for rockabilly outfit Cousin Harley and roots American project Boxcar Campfire.

You really should check out Pigat's collaboration with Spanish guitarist Diego 'El Twanguero' García and his acclaimed series of instructional DVDs for Travis picking, rockabilly and jazz. And as if that wasn't enough for one guy's CV, Pigat is also the owner of Little Pig Records, as well as a clinician and demonstrator for Gretsch. *Guitar & Bass* meets the man himself...

> "Most people seem to regard me as a rockabilly player these days, but I consider myself a jazz and country player"

**G&B: You're leading such a glamorous life Paul, I'm surprised we managed to catch up with you...**

PP: "Yeah, like strapping a baby to the front of me and taking a walk around the park, changing diapers, it's just a different type of glamour!"

**Tell us a bit about your background...**

"I started playing professionally when I was about 14. I grew up in Toronto, Ontario, and back in the early 80s, if you were relatively large, people didn't really care if you were of an age to be in bars. I was playing a lot of rock 'n' roll and 70s country music. I did that all through my teenage years, then I went to university to study classical theory and composition. I finished the degree, promptly got disillusioned and swore I would never play classical music again.

"Then I toured with a country band for a couple of years all around Canada, until I decided I'd had enough of that and I moved out west. That's when I got more established playing swing, rockabilly and classic rock 'n' roll. Most people seem to regard me as a rockabilly player these days, but I consider myself a jazz and country player. If you put those two together you kind of get 'neobilly', and that's what rockabilly is. It's country and blues mixed with whatever, but I just call it roots music."

**So you just have to change your outfit to suit the gig?**

"That's basically it. My current projects include Boxcar Campfire, Cousin Harley and two jazz groups called the Paul Pigat Trio and The Smoking Jackets, which is a quintet. I play exactly the same stuff in all of them, but I just wear different clothes. It's about context, really. All of us only have one voice, it just depends how you use it."

**Is that reflected in your choice of guitars for different projects?**

"Very much so. Sometimes I'll choose the guitar depending on who I'm playing with. Like right now, the Gretsches will come out when I'm playing large rooms and festivals, where I need a guitar that can take up a ton of space. If I need a guitar that's a little more surgical, then I'll go with a solidbody-type >

sound. If I'm playing with my guys – just the three of us – and I need to sound as big as I possibly can, that's where the Gretsches come in."

**I first saw you playing a 1949 Gibson ES-350 in your instructional DVDs...**

"That was my first really high-quality archtop. My first archtop was an 18-inch Silvertone, but I had been desperately looking for an ES-350 for years. Danny Gatton was really important for me, and he had an ES-350T, and my favourite jazz player to this day is Tal Farlow, who also played an ES-350.

"I was working at a music store part-time, and I got a call from the owner, who said: 'Paul, the guitar you want just came through the door, but it's in really terrible shape'. I was due to go on tour that afternoon, so I ran down to the store and it turned out the guitar had been in a fire. It was completely covered in soot and there was water damage all over it. The previous owner had decided the neck width wasn't right, so to make it as wide as a classical neck he took off the fingerboard bindings and glued on maple extensions and re-fretted across them. It was a nightmare and I couldn't even get a sound out of it.

"After fiddling with the controls for a while and banging on the pickups, I finally made it go 'blatt'. So I bought it and restored it and, along with a '64 Gibson ES-125TDC, it became my main guitar until I met Joe Carducci and Fred Gretsch. The P-90s are really low-output and sound sort of 'doinky', but that's part of its charm."

**You came to Gretsch guitars relatively late in the day...**

"Finding a good Gretsch in Toronto when I was a kid was like finding a needle in a haystack – the reason being there weren't that many of them up here. Also, we have Randy Bachman and he bought them all. I think every Gretsch in Canada went through his hands. I had recorded with a Roc Jet once and I really liked it, and I had really liked a couple of 50s Constellation acoustics, but I didn't know much about them."

> "Finding a good Gretsch in Toronto when I was a kid was like finding a needle in a haystack – there weren't many up here"

**How did your relationship with Gretsch come about?**

"It all goes back to 2008. I had been booked to play Viva Las Vegas, and a bunch of the guys from The Gretsch Pages forum wanted to meet me, so we arranged to hook up at the Gretsch booth. Anyway, the guys introduced me to Joe Carducci and he asked me if I wanted to use one of their instruments for the show that night. I thought the guitars were beautiful, but the thing I was really drawn to was the Victoria-made Gretsch Executive amps they had there. I loved the idea of a low-wattage amplifier in a large cabinet with a 15-inch speaker. So I agreed to use a Black Falcon guitar if I could borrow the amp as well.

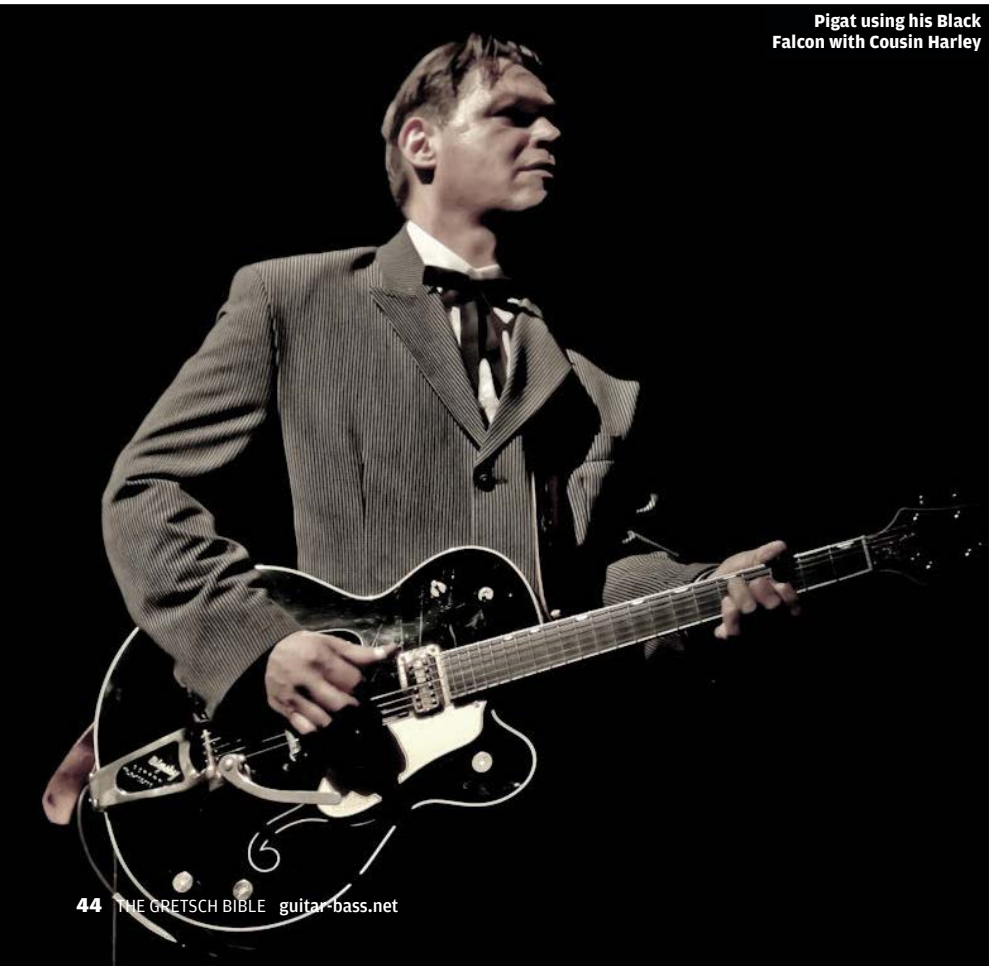
"I had one of my Gibsons with me, and in all honesty, I thought I'd use the Gretsch for maybe a couple of songs, but I ended up using it for the whole night. I thought it was a fantastic rig, it screamed when I wanted it to, it was mellow when I wanted it to be mellow and it was bulletproof. I'm by no means gentle on guitars and it wasn't even going out of tune.

"I got offstage and Joe came up to me to arrange a meeting for the following day. We had breakfast together and Joe asked if I wanted to be an endorser and become an official Gretsch clinician. I agreed and he ended up sending me that exact rig I used at the show. I did a bunch of clinics and now I do a couple every year."

**Is there a Paul Pigat signature model on the horizon?**

"It just so happens I have it right here. I designed it with Stephen Stern, and so far it's a one of a kind. The big deal is that it's a very thin body with 'cat's eye' soundholes. It's about the same depth as a '61 Clipper, but 17 inches wide rather than 16 inches, and it has a 25-½-inch scale. I also specified a scripty logo with a 40s headstock, block inlays, stair-step bridge and tone bars. TV Jones >

Pigat's Custom Shop Synchro Club



Pigat using his Black Falcon with Cousin Harley

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made me a custom set of pickups – a Filter'Tron in the bridge and one T-Armond, both in Dynasonic-sized housings. The controls are a master volume with two Grease Bucket tone controls.

"Basically, I told Stephen that there were two Gretsch guitars I had always desired. The first was a '61 Country Club and the second was the guitar Django Reinhardt borrowed when he came to North America – a 1939 Synchromatic. So if it goes into production, this model will be called the Synchro Club."

**You obviously like DeArmond and Filter'Tron pickups, then...**

"I do, but if I had to choose just one, it would be the DeArmond. There's a clarity to the DeArmonds that no humbucker will ever match – unless you get an original Gibson PAF. The stock DeArmond is so clear, and I like to hear the sound of the string. I think of the guitar as a tiny piano and I want to hear the 'hammer' hit the string.

"With the DeArmonds, I can hear my pick on the string and I can make it sound about five different ways, depending on how I pick it. The spectrum on them is massive and if you're playing in a trio with a pickup that's so hi-fi, it fills up a lot of space.

"I don't think Dynasonics are that great for heavy drive, but if you like to put a little bit of dirt on them, they sound fantastic. They're pretty aggressive and bitey, yet they don't turn into a ball of mush. The Filter'Tron is more compressed, so if I'm playing something more hard-rocking or psychobilly I prefer the Filter'Trons. That's why I chose one of each for my guitar."

Pigat digging in on his White Falcon

> "There's a real charm to vintage Gretsches, but if you're looking for high build quality, you're much better off with the new ones"

**Are you a vintage guitar fan? Or can a skilled builder make a guitar that's just as good these days?**

"I think they can get pretty close, but with certain guitars there are golden eras. For instance, I know a lot about Telecasters and finding a modern one that's as good as one from the mid-50s would be really difficult, no matter how much you spend.

"Mike Eldred from the Fender Custom Shop made me a '55 replica and it's great, but I took it over to my friend's place, who has the only existing sunburst '55, and it mopped the floor with mine. It's still the best Telecaster I've ever owned, but it wasn't even close to that '55. There will always be stellar examples, but that's the point where it becomes cork sniffing. You'd be amazed how close you can get these days with a modern guitar without having to spend ridiculous money, but you have to be patient and find the right one.

"It's certainly doable. I was on the road with Jakob Dylan a few years ago and I showed up to a rehearsal in New York City with a Guild M-20 acoustic and a Mark Jenny T-type. That's all I needed, because I rarely break strings, but my guitar tech was losing his mind because I didn't have a backup.

When I got to Nashville, I called up Fender and asked if I could get a Classic Vibe Tele, and I ended up using it for the rest of the tour. When people ask me about the differences between vintage Gretsches and the new ones, I tell them there's a real charm to the old ones; they're beautiful and iconic and they've got a sound that is very much of that era. But if you're looking for high build quality, you're much better off with the new ones."

**Didn't you get to record with Jakob Dylan at Sun Studio?**

"Yes, we did that. It was awesome and the people at Sun were amazing. There's not a lot of stuff left in that room anymore that's authentic, but it's where I discovered my

love of 5E3s. In the corner, there was this destroyed '57 Deluxe. A cat had obviously been at the thing, and it was like a ball of fuzz, but I plugged in and fell in love with it.

"I used it for the session and got one right away when I went home. A tweed Deluxe has limitations in terms of volume, but if you're looking for something that just sounds good at a reasonable volume, you don't need anything else.

"I'm very conscious about size. I like my rig to be small because when I was a kid playing around Toronto, I didn't drive. I lived way up in the north-east part of Toronto and all my gigs were downtown. That's quite a distance, so I would grab my Super Reverb in one hand, carry my Telecaster in my backpack with a load of pedals and get on the bus, take the subway, then walk 10 blocks. So I'm not into carrying anything anymore."

**Do you make much use of pedals?**

"There are two pedals that have been in my rig since forever. One is a Boss CS-2 compressor and the other is a Boss DM-2 analogue delay. Now I'm using a Deluxe, I use the Boss FRV-1 pedal for reverb. I need something to sound like a spring and it does. I grew up with Boss effects and I love them. I've been bouncing between four drives lately. My standard is a Z.Vex Box Of Rock, and I've been using a [Nocturne] Shrunken Brain and Fez Drive, which works really well with Telecasters. There's a company out of Vancouver called Union Tube & Transistor, and I use their Tone Druid."

**Are you a fan of flatwound strings?**

"I use 11-gauge round wounds on all my electric guitars. It doesn't matter who makes them, they all wear out equally as fast. That being said, I only use 12-gauge flatwounds on two of my Gibsons. I'm planning an online series of lessons, and for each one the guitar will be appropriate for the style I'm teaching. For the lesson on Grady Martin, I'll use my Bigsby guitar with flatwounds. You know, if you want to play rockabilly all you need to do is listen to Grady Martin. That will give you the kernel of everything you need to know to be a convincing rockabilly guitar player."

**Any plans to visit the UK soon?**

"I think we're coming to Europe in November, but so far, we haven't got any UK bookings. It's about time I came back because I need to go to Greggs and buy a pasty. Last time we conducted an experiment to see how long a human being can survive eating nothing but Greggs' pasties. The answer is three days and after that, you just can't do it anymore."

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THE *Guitar & Bass* INTERVIEW

# "I went to Norman's Rare Guitars and saw this amazing Gretsch. I was like 'Alright, I'm done!'"

English singer-songwriter Gabrielle Aplin knew she'd found her dream guitar when she stumbled upon a '63 Gretsch 6120 Chet Atkins Nashville. She tells *G&B* why it was love at first sight...

Interview **Chris Vinnicombe** | Photography **Eleanor Jane**

If you've switched on your radio lately, you've heard Gabrielle Aplin. The Wiltshire singer-songwriter shot to prominence when her debut album, *English Rain*, entered the UK album chart at number two back in May 2013. Aplin's cover of Frankie Goes To Hollywood's *The Power Of Love* featured on a John Lewis commercial and bagged her a singles chart number one, while her second studio long-player *Light Up The Dark* (2015) confirmed her place as a talented storyteller inspired by the likes of Nick Drake, Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell. Aplin's 1963 Gretsch 6120 Chet Atkins Nashville model has turned quite a few heads, too.

Although the 23-year-old is a skilled pianist, she prefers to write on the guitar, turning frequently to her much-loved 6120, and worked alongside former Temperance Movement guitarist Luke Potashnick on *Light Up The Dark*, on which the instrument features. Aplin stumbled upon the guitar in a legendary vintage guitar shop in California and it was love at first sight.

"I felt like I was stuck writing with my acoustic guitar a little bit," she recalls. "I never really got into electric guitars until about two and a half years ago. I went to LA – there's an amazing shop called Norman's Rare Guitars – he has loads of vintage guitars and stuff. I just went in and saw this amazing Gretsch, and I was like, 'Alright, I'm done!'. I'm really into old guitars with stories."

Aplin finds inspiration in the allure of musicians who have their own voice on the instrument, rather than those with flawless technique. She says: "I really like seeing an artist who clearly hasn't been taught to play the guitar, playing the guitar. Or someone who has their own way.

"I don't want it to look or sound like it's perfect. It has to be really free and a bit wobbly, as long as it can sit around everything else. I taught myself completely, and I've found my way of playing... I'm constantly trying to make sure I don't know everything! I like that element of not knowing everything perfectly, because in the writing you end up coming out with all these weird chord changes and weird things; I like having that element of discovery when you're playing, and having to guess where you are going, because you never know what's going to come out." >

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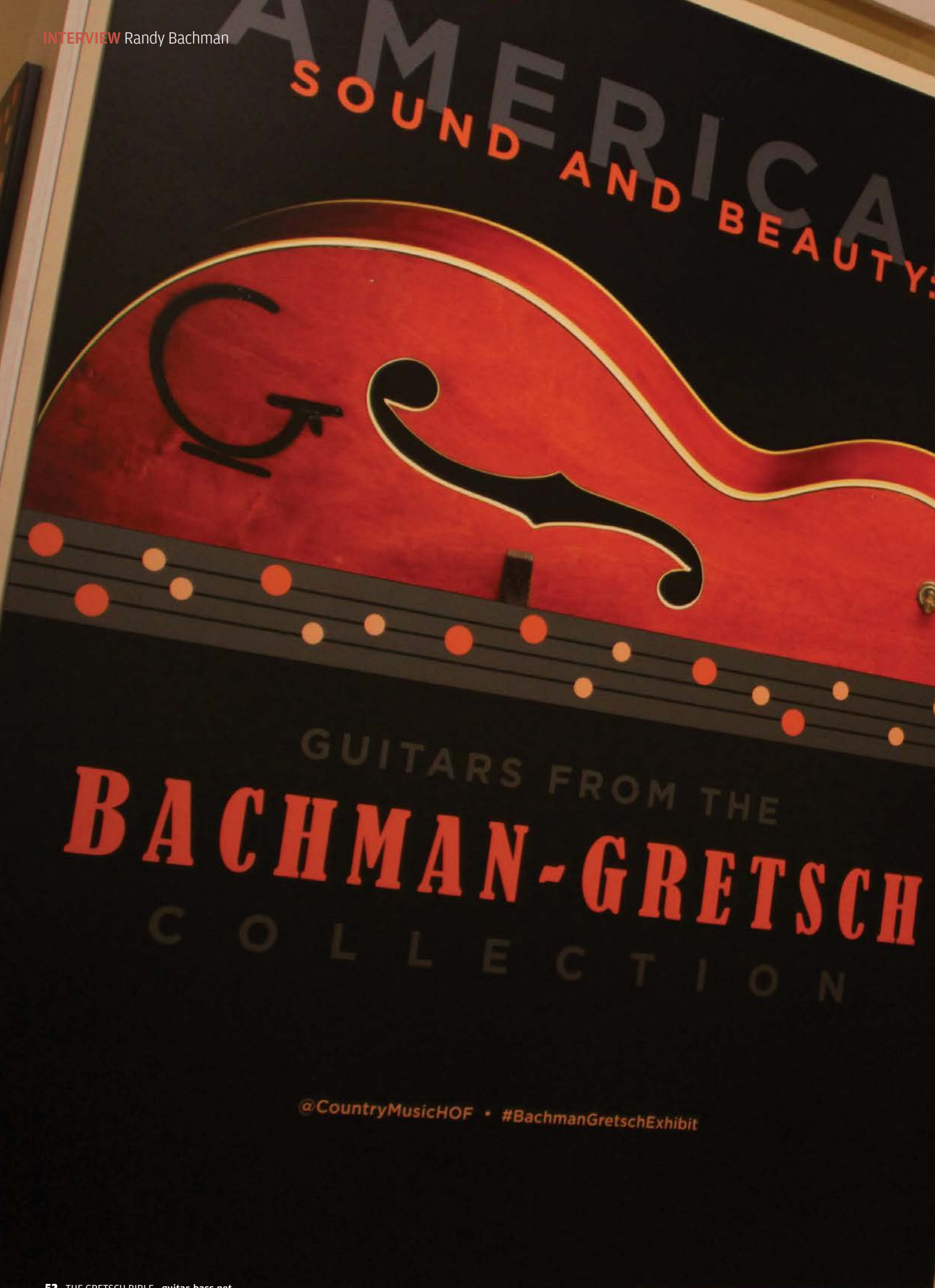

AMERICA
SOUND AND BEAUTY
GUITARS FROM THE
BACHMAN-GRETSCH
COLLECTION
@CountryMusicHOF • #BachmanGretschExhibit

# You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet

When the Gretsch Foundation bought Randy Bachman's 385-strong collection in 2008, it acquired one of the most comprehensive and attractive arsenals of Gretsch guitars on the planet. Fred Gretsch donated the whole lot to the Country Music Hall of Fame and the resulting exhibition – American Sound And Beauty: Guitars From The Bachman-Gretsch Collection – is the largest display of stringed instruments in the museum's illustrious history

Having suffered the theft of a beloved 6120 mid-way through the 1970s, Bachman-Turner Overdrive founder Randy Bachman made amends by gradually stockpiling an incredible 385 Gretsch guitars. 30 years later, the Gretsch Foundation bought the lot and donated them to the Country Music Hall Of Fame. A selection of 75 of the most desirable instruments went on display at the Hall Of Fame in Nashville this January, and the exhibition is open to the public – for the first and possibly only time – until 17 July. As the incredible shots over the next six pages show, it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see some of the rarest guitars in the Gretsch catalogue, all under one roof. *Guitar & Bass* met Bachman to talk about the highlights of this amazing collection.

*"Nashville is the place for them to be. I had nowhere to put them; they were all in cases"*

The guitars on show are divided into three eras – American Made (1927-47), the Golden Era (1946-66) and the Baldwin Era (1967-81), with the collection including Orchestra models, Country Gentlemans, Falcons, Roundups, Ranchers, Ramblers, Corvettes and, perhaps most beguiling of all, an extremely rare 1955 White Penguin.

"Gretsch was the 'country' guitar," says Bachman, "and Nashville is the place for them to be. I had nowhere to put them; they were all in cases. It's a bit like having >

Drew Maynard

A selection of the 75 guitars on show in Nashville, with a 1967 711 Songbird Sam Goody Custom Model front left

An early Gretsch Synchromatic

books in a library when the library is closed. It makes more sense to have them on the wall like paintings."

Bachman's Gretsch obsession began when his original orange 6120, used on The Guess Who's version of *Shakin' All Over* and BTO's *Takin' Care Of Business*, was stolen from his hotel room in Toronto in 1976. He responded by acquiring another that was just two serial numbers away, but in the course of trying to reclaim the original, he became known as a Gretsch expert... even though he had yet to earn the title. "I sent letters and faxes to shops, and I would buy every Gretsch they had as a trade-in, so I had six, then 12, then 20, then hundreds. Fred Gretsch came to me and said, 'You've got my museum – can I buy it?'

*"I would buy every Gretsch they had as a trade-in, so I had six, then 12, then 20, then hundreds"*

"People used to call me up for advice on what a Gretsch they were thinking of buying should look like, and I used to walk down to my basement and describe the whole guitar – the pickups, the dots, the tuners, where the horseshoe should be. They'd say 'What do we owe you?' and I'd say 'nothing' – then they'd send me a Gretsch ukulele or an organ, even an ocarina.

"Gretsch put things out during the war when people were leaving New York in battleships. He'd give them army-green ukuleles to play on the boat. The electronic organs were like harmonicas; you plugged them in and the air blew over the pipes almost like an electric accordion. Someone I helped gave me one when he sold four or five Gretsches and made money on them.

Custom Transition Roundup with real leather binding and buckle tailpiece

Rare Custom Stereo White Falcon with gold trim

1955 Chet Atkins 6120 with G brand and two gold DeArmond pickups

**Randy Bachman playing his Gretsch 6120**

Steer head on the headstock of Walnut Country Gentleman

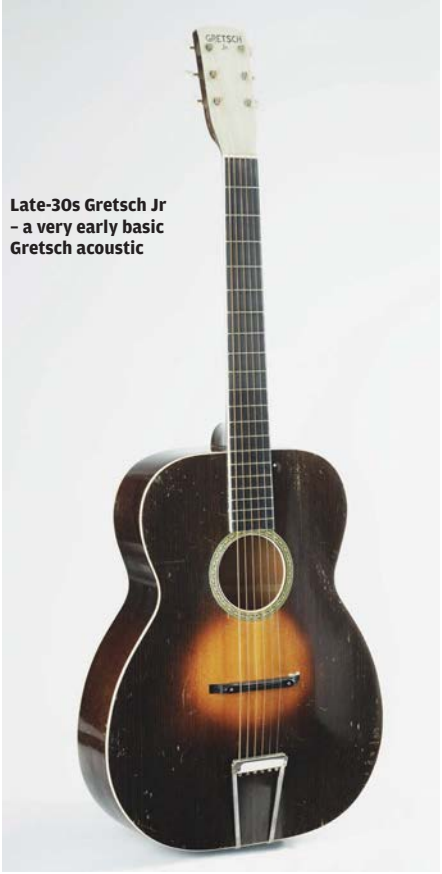
Walnut Country Gentleman

A cross-section of the beautiful early guitars on show

This highly rare 711 Songbird features G soundholes

Double-cut Champagne Sparkle Jet

1967 Monkees Rock N' Roll Model autographed by Michael Nesmith



Late-30s Gretsch Jr – a very early basic Gretsch acoustic

"There was all kinds of weird paraphernalia, like strings that came in a little carousel that spun around like a Lazy Susan. There were eight strings in a package with a spare high B and E. The idea was you could put on lighter strings, a B for a G, then start bending notes like Chuck Berry without buying extra strings. They came in a beautiful round plastic case like a woman's make-up case, and you could put your picks in it. The whole memorabilia thing was great! Guys would send me posters, banners and clocks from the stores, and I ended up with all this stuff."

Mick Buck, the museum's curatorial director, said at the launch of the exhibition:

*"If one were to set out now to duplicate this collection, they'd need unlimited funds"*

"We're delighted to have this opportunity to exhibit these guitars. While it doesn't represent the entire Bachman-Gretsch collection, we've arranged these 75 guitars in a way that will be pretty awe-inspiring, not only for guitar players or gearheads, but also people who don't necessarily think they care about guitars. These instruments are that beautiful.

"If one were to set out now to duplicate this collection, they'd need unlimited funds. Even then, you couldn't do it because some of these are one-of-a-kind custom models."

***For more information on the exhibition, visit countrymusichalloffame.org***

White Penguin 6123 from 1955, the year the model was introduced

Rare top-of-the-line mid-30s Artist Orchestra Model No 150

Very rare all-stock 1966 Silver Duke 6133 with two HiLo'Tron pickups

GRETSCH

THE Guitar & Bass INTERVIEW

# "The Black Phoenix is the Big Kahuna. This guitar is just wow, it's just a beautiful guitar"

Rockabilly king Brian Setzer has been honoured with several Gretsch signature models, not least the stunning Black Phoenix. He spoke to *G&B* on the eve of his most recent solo record...

Three-time Grammy Award winner and founder of the Stray Cats, not to mention his own 18-piece Orchestra, Brian Setzer has an extensive range of Gretsch signature guitars, including the Nashville and Hot Rod ranges and the stunning Black Phoenix. Setzer also has a set of TV Jones pickups bearing his name. He was personally invited to induct Chet Atkins into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and in 2014 was asked to donate a replica of his original 1959 6120 Stray Cat. He's sold more than 13 million records and has been referred to as the saviour of both rockabilly and swing. So, yes, he's something of a big deal in the world of Gretsch guitars.

We caught up with Setzer during the recording of his most recent solo album, *Rockabilly Riot! All Original* to talk about his love of the brand, how he gets the ultimate rockabilly sound and how Gretsch guitars shaped the record.

"For my guitar sound, I just plugged in my old '59 6120 Gretsch through a '63 Fender Bassman amp and there wasn't really any need to change it," he says. "In the past I've done a lot of changes – there might have been some new models mixed with the old ones – but on this record I just plugged it in and tore it up. On one track, I used an old Magnatone amp, the old Buddy Holly amp – I've got one of those for the vibrato."

> "My '59 Gretsch and Bassman bridges the gap between rockabilly and rock. It's just a nice rocking, stinging sound"

Does Setzer believe the '59 6120 and '63 Fender Bassman combination represents the 'ultimate' rockabilly sound? "I guess you could say there are different rockabilly set-ups – everyone has their own," he says. "But for me, my '59 Gretsch and Bassman bridges the gap between rockabilly and rock. It's just a nice rocking, stinging sound." >

**The G6120SSU Brian Setzer Nashville**

**Setzer's signature G6136SLBP Black Phoenix**

**The G6120SH Brian Setzer Hot Rod in Green Sparkle**

Asked how his love of the Gretsch hollowbodies his name has become synonymous with developed, Setzer replies: "That relationship just came to be, really. The Gretsch was the first thing that I could afford. My guitar was 100 bucks and it was just available at the time. Then, when I made some money, I went out and bought other guitars and amps, but I ended up thinking, 'Nah, I got it right in the first place'."

Setzer has a large and highly desirable guitar collection, which he estimates at "about 60 to 70" pieces, and has been honoured with numerous Gretsch models bearing his name over the years – some of the most attractive signature guitars you'll find anywhere. Among them are the Hot Rod models based on stripped-down 6120s, the Nashville range and the Black Phoenix, inspired by the 6136 Falcon, with silver sparkle binding, longer scale for improved upper-register access and, unlike a Falcon, no tone controls.

"The Black Phoenix is the Big Kahuna," says Setzer. "This guitar is just, wow! It's got a longer scale and that is really helpful in the upper register when you are playing up high, you just have more room up there. It's so clean sounding.

"It's got the full 17-inch body and the new pickups. But unlike a Falcon, the Phoenix does not have the tone controls. It's a little clearer, a little louder.

"It's just a beautiful guitar. We just changed a couple things and added all the modern updates. And the silver-sparkle binding on the black... I mean, yeah, it's just cool. It rocks my world. Boy, I do have a lot of signature models..."

TV Jones pickups are another big ingredient of Setzer's sound, and it's a partnership that became even more significant with the release of a Brian Setzer signature set. Derived from Setzer's long-time preference for the TV Jones TV Classic, the model is a unique design created to provide more clarity and punch. "Tom's taken the original Filter'Tron pickup from the 1950s and he's actually made them better," he says.

"He's got the sound exactly the same, but he's fixed up things like the spacing between the strings, he's straightened out a lot of things on them, and now he's got three or four different models of pickups. He's got some that are powerful for people who want a little more grit to their sound, he's got some that are really clean for people who play cleaner than I do. He's taken that tone and ran in different directions with it."

> "When I made some money, I went out and bought other guitars, but ended up thinking, 'Nah, I got it right in the first place'"

# STAR GUITAR JOE BONAMASSA

"I try to learn something new about a guitar every day. You've gotta understand that by playing them, that's when you really get to know what's up"

**This 1958 Gretsch Country Club can be heard on the track *Drive* from Joe's latest album, *Blues Of Desperation*, strung with flatwounds. Joe says: "It's the same thing with Jaguars and Jazzmasters. As soon as you use flatwound strings, the whole guitar, the scale, everything makes sense"**

# Cult Favourite

## Billy Duffy's 1970s White Falcon is integral to The Cult's gothic sound, and in 2013 Gretsch honoured the man who is said to have introduced Johnny Marr to guitar with his own signature model

Photography Mick Peek

Throughout the 1980s, Gretsch's White Falcon became synonymous with The Cult's gloomy post-punk sound, leading the brand to honour guitarist Billy Duffy with his own G7593T Billy Duffy White Falcon signature model, bestowing it with the prestigious billing of "one of the the most unique and bewitching White Falcon guitars ever made".

Duffy's stunning hollowbody has some unique specifications particular to the model, including period-correct 70s Baldwin-era styling, pure white gloss nitrocellulose lacquer finish, V-shaped Falcon headstock, silver-sparkle binding, custom-wound hot Black Top Filter'Tron pickups with three-point adjustable 70s-style metal bezels and Duffy's preferred Bigsby tailpiece. Additional features include a 17-inch wide, 2 ¾"-deep single-cutaway three-ply maple body with a three-ply maple arched top and back, and two spruce parallel tone bars and a sound post. The neck is three-piece maple with an ebony fingerboard, pearloid wide-block fretboard inlays and chrome-plated truss-rod cover with Duffy's signature emblazoned on it. The spec list is rounded out by a chrome-plated output jack plate, 70s-style aluminium G arrow knobs and a speckled grey Billy Duffy case.

> "This guitar is very personal to me. The big white Gretsch became synonymous with the band"

"This guitar is very personal to me," said Duffy when it was launched. "It's hard to separate the guitar from the evolution of [The Cult's] sound. In essence, the big white Gretsch became synonymous with the band very quickly. I'm not really that much of a sentimental person, but in a house fire it would be the first non-living thing that I'd be going for.

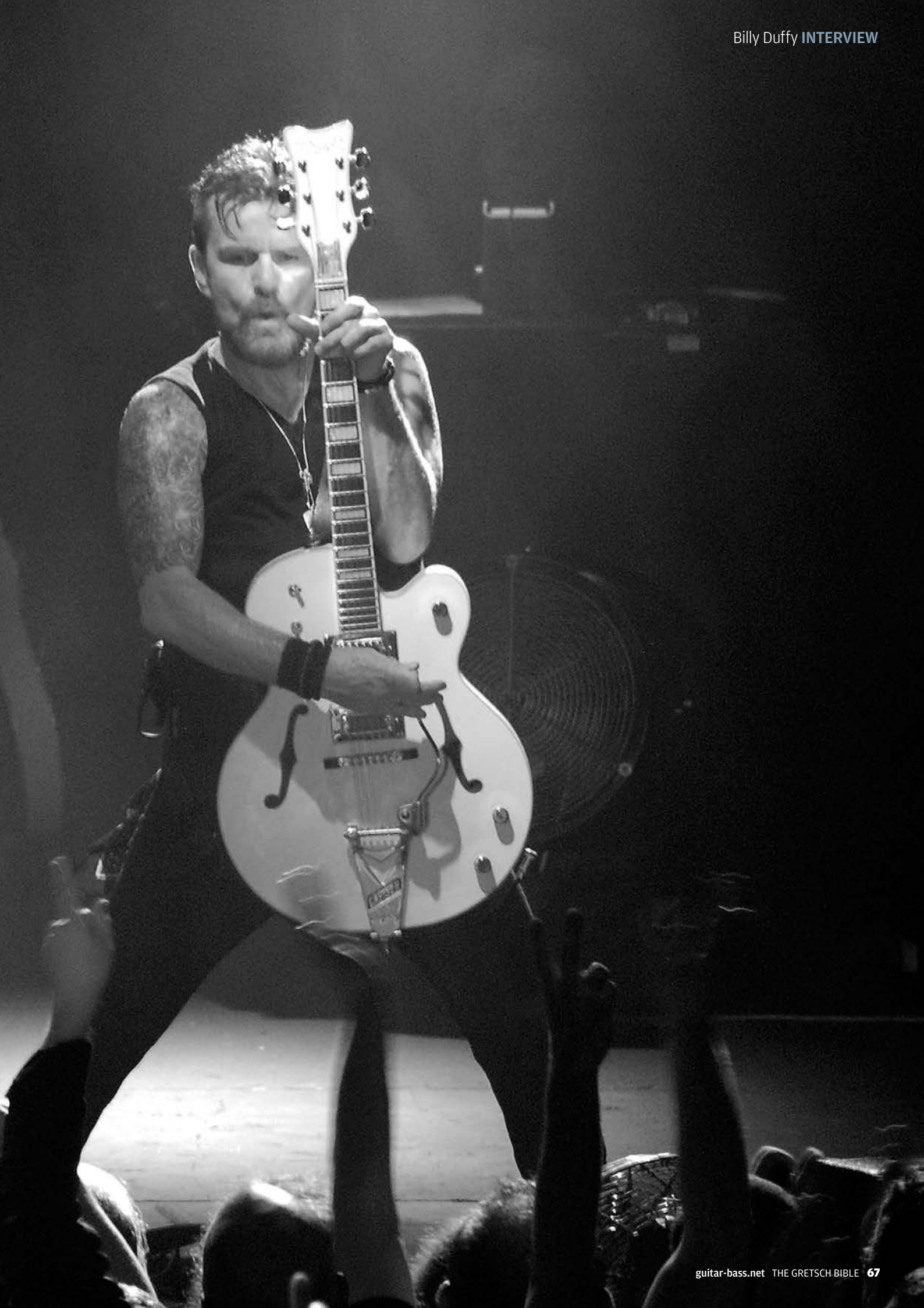
"It's not for the faint-hearted. It's massive. You've got to have big hands and you've got to really command the instrument when you play it. You can't really play it with any degree of fear."

Duffy burst out of London's early 80s post-punk scene in Theatre Of Hate before meeting Ian Astbury and developing one of rock 'n' roll's most powerful, unique and enduring duos into what would become The Cult. Duffy's combination of thick powerchords steeped in rich chorused delay, melodic Morricone-inspired lead phrases and filthy feedback-laden solos created an unparalleled sound.

The Cult's first two albums, *Dreamtime* and *Love*, solidified their place among the pre-indie elite, with the latter album featuring what would become their most popular single, *She Sells Sanctuary*. Every track on those iconic records featured Duffy's Gretsch White Falcon exclusively, and he used it on every subsequent album; most notably, the chart-topping *Electric* and *Sonic Temple*, and 2012's *Choice Of Weapon*.

For more info on Billy Duffy and the Gretsch G7593T, visit www.billyduffy.com.

Duffy playing the G7593T Black Falcon



Duffy playing the White Falcon, below, and (right) in vintage Cult action

"It's not for the faint-hearted. It's massive... You can't really play it with any degree of fear"

# Singin' To My Baby

Rockabilly star Darrel Higham has played alongside the likes of Jeff Beck and Chrissie Hynde. Here, he recalls how it all started and talks about the man who first sparked his Gretsch appetite, the great Eddie Cochran

The path to Gretsch ownership began for Darrel Higham in 1975, as the music of Elvis Presley blasted through the wall of his childhood home from a neighbouring house. Blown away by the sound of the King, Darrel found out from his mother that there were Presley LPs in the family collection – and when he flicked through the vinyl, another discovery set him on the road he follows to this day. "I found this album," he says. "It was Eddie Cochran's *Singin' To My Baby*."

The LP sleeve bears three photos of Cochran, one of which sees him holding his orange Gretsch 6120. "I instantly fell in love with that guitar – and from that moment onwards, I just wanted to be Eddie Cochran," says Higham, who is now one of the foremost rockabilly guitarists in the UK. He plays alongside ex-Stray Cat Slim Jim Phantom in their band Kat Men, backed Jeff Beck on his *Rock 'n' Roll Party* Les Paul tribute album, and found mainstream success with ex-wife Imelda May, who became an ambassador for all things rockabilly.

Higham's first guitar wasn't the magical Gretsch 6120 he so desired; it was a Spanish classical. The young Darrel broke out the felt-tip pens and drew a G brand, f-holes and a Bigsby on it and posed in front of the mirror. Learning to play when he was 12 or 13, he finally laid his hands on his first Gretsch 6120 – one of the first reissues to hit these shores – at the age of 19. "It was number 40 of the first batch made," he says. "When I first saw it I was mesmerised because it was just so beautiful. It cost £1,500. In 1989, that was a lot of money, but I managed to cobble it together somehow.

"As time went by, I started realising it was nowhere near the same as the '55 Cochran Gretsch, so I spent years modifying it. I changed the pickups, changed the Bigsby and did a lot of work. The irony is that I think the very last year I had it, it was absolutely spot on."

Sadly, that Gretsch was stolen from a theatre in Melton Mowbray in 1998. "Since then, I've struggled to find a guitar that I can play as well," says Higham. "That was the one, the special guitar that all guitarists talk about. I was really gutted... I mean totally distraught. It was like losing a friend. There's often a guitar that comes up on eBay and I look at it and I think, 'Could that be it?'"

> "That was the one, the special guitar that all guitarists talk about. It was like losing a friend"

**Higham's 2008 Gretsch 6120 Custom Shop (left) and 5170**

Higham's never been a vintage-guitar fan, preferring the reliability of modern Gretsches for live work. "I don't really like second-hand guitars, as a rule," he says. "If I had an original '55 Gretsch, I'd probably be afraid to play it and I'd lock it in a bank vault. My whole philosophy is for rockabilly to be modern, and that goes for the gear that I play, too. It's all new stuff that's made to look old."

Higham played a Custom Shop Gretsch 6120 built by master luthier Stephen Stern on most of the Kat Men album, *The Kat Men Cometh*; he spotted it leaning in Beck's hallway while the former Yardbirds guitarist was mulling over whether to purchase it himself. "It's been aged, and if you put it next to an original, you couldn't really tell the difference," says Higham. "I did mod it so it looked like the Cochran guitar with the P-90 and a fixed-arm Bigsby. This was just before they brought out the Custom Shop Cochran signature model."

Higham also picked up his White Falcons around the same time. "I got such a good deal on the first one that it was silly not to buy it," he says. "I love the 6120, but I'm a big bloke and it can feel a bit like a ukulele. The Falcon is a bigger guitar, but they have big necks and I'm used to the narrow 6120 necks, so I do struggle with them. I still think that they're the most beautiful guitars on earth."

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Guitar & Bass AWARD CHOICE 9/10

# Gretsch Players Edition & Vintage Select Edition guitars

It ain't nuthin' but a G twang as **CHRIS VINNICOMBE** checks out a couple of contrasting new takes on old classics from Gretsch

Winter NAMM 2016 saw Gretsch unveil a stack of new models and restructure its Japanese-made Professional Collection into two distinct strands: the Players Edition and the Vintage Select Edition. Broadly speaking, the Vintage Select models are reissues of classic Gretsch guitars from specific years of manufacture, while the Players Edition instruments are designed to be a little more robust and road-worthy.

Gretsch product manager Adam Bowden-Smith explains: "The Vintage Select guitars are period-correct editions of our most famous models from what many consider to be the golden age of Gretsch guitars, so we have models from 1955, '59, '62, etc. All years that had a defining effect on the model and the brand as a whole. Having said that, there are some concessions to the modern player: 'invisible' upgrades, if you will, that don't spoil the vintage look, such as pinned bridges and treble bleed on the master volume.

"The Players Edition guitars are the modern Gretsch for the modern player. While retaining 'That Great Gretsch Sound' and looks, they have many upgrades that mean your Gretsch can be your main guitar, as we say, 'every song, every night'.

"Improving gigability was our main aim. The String-Thru Bigsby, for example, transforms a Bigsby-equipped guitar from a string-changing headache to a joy! Meanwhile, the locking tuners, Tusq XL nut and pinned Rocking Bar bridge work in cahoots to maximise tuning stability and tone. The bodies are slightly thinner, too, for comfort. Most 50s-style Gretsches are 2.75 inches deep, the Players Edition are 2.25 inches. It doesn't sound like much, but that half inch makes all the difference!"

Representing the Players Edition here is the marvelously ostentatious G6136T-BLK Players Edition Falcon. In the vintage reissue corner is the G6122T-62 Vintage Select Edition '62 Chet Atkins Country Gentleman: a dead ringer for the guitar that George Harrison played when 73 million Americans tuned in to watch The Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show on 9 February 1964.

*The workers in the Terada factory aren't just making 'em like they used to in Brooklyn – they're making them better*

In 2016, when it comes to fit and finish, the workers in the Terada factory in Japan aren't simply making 'em like they used to in Brooklyn – they're making them better and with a much higher degree of consistency. Although there's something special about a good old Gretsch, we've encountered some rather wonky vintage examples, too. There's none of that here: the standard of construction is excellent throughout.

All that said, under hot lights in front of a baying crowd, a traditionally constructed Gretsch can still behave more like a bucking bronco than a trusty steed. The Brylcreem'd masses have devised their own DIY solutions over the years, but 2013 saw Gretsch release a range of Center Block models designed to be considerably more stable and high-volume and gain-friendly than its hollowbody models and cast the net wider than the brand's heartland rockabilly demographic.

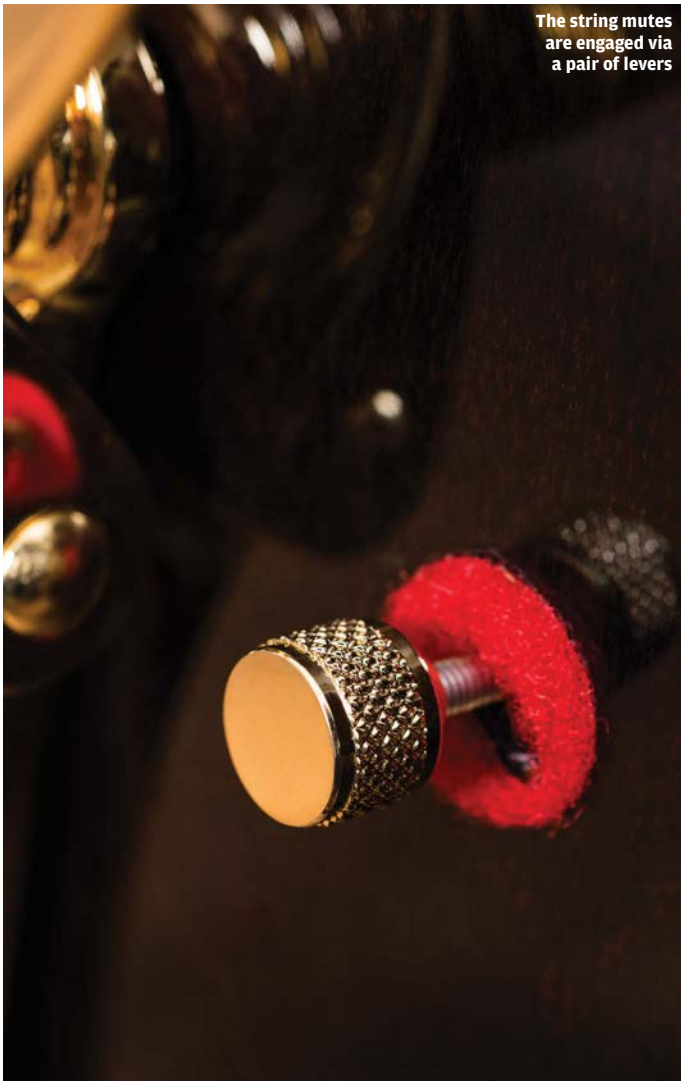
We're big fans of the G6137TCB Center Block Panther (currently £2,599) to the extent that it's been this writer's main gigging and recording guitar – usurping a long-suffering ES-335 – for a couple of years now. Even though Chet Atkins was among those calling for the company to introduce centre-blocks as bands got louder in the late 1950s, there are still plenty of Gretsch fans who consider the lively response and depth of hollowbody construction absolutely essential to the Gretsch archtop experience.

Of course, neither the Players Edition Falcon nor the Vintage Select Edition Country Gentleman are completely >

**LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...**

The entry point to Gretsch's new 'workingman' Players Edition range comes courtesy of the **G6118T Anniversary** and **G6119T Tennessee Rose** models (both **£1,899**). The **Gretsch G6137TCB Center Block Panther £2,599** shares the Country Gentleman's classic double-cutaway outline but has upper-fret access and feedback resistance more akin to a **Gibson ES-335**. **Guild**'s **Starfire** models (from **£614**) have serious heritage, and offer great value for money and wonderfully airy, vintage-style tones. Elsewhere, the **Gibson Memphis 1959 ES-330 £2,949** is a real thriller that covers an awful lot of ground, from Grant Green to the Brit beat boom and beyond.

Knobs don't get much fancier than the Falcon's



The string mutes are engaged via a pair of levers

The Country Gentleman features a mother of pearl logo on its headstock

The Falcon features gold sparkle binding with three-ply purfling

**Though the Country Gent's dual string mutes may seem archaic, they can be used to create interesting textures**

hollow inside: the Falcon features ML bracing (designed by Fender/Gretsch guru Mike Lewis and Masao Terada of the Terada company, this is similar to trestle bracing except the back and the top have two points of contact rather than four, retaining contact beneath the bridge but dispensing with the posts near the neck join), while the Country Gentleman has vintage-style parallel tone bars that run lengthways beneath the top.

## In use

As the owner of a modern Gretsch, who replaced the stock tune-o-matic with a Rocking Bar bridge, this writer can attest to the fact that, when pinned and properly maintained, there are no significant tuning or intonation woes to be had from this design. In addition, the low E string stays put in its channel even when hit very hard – something that can be a problem when the distance between bridge and tailpiece creates a shallow break angle over the bridge. Throw in the drilled anchor bar on the Falcon's String-Thru Bigsby and string changes are a breeze, too.

Both necks are slim and comfortable, but although the Vintage Select Country Gentleman incorporates some stealthy pragmatism, it's worth noting that its large heel and small vintage-style frets make it a less-than-easy ride in positions above the 15th fret. The additional access afforded by the double cutaway is negated somewhat by the heel joining the body at the 14th fret; perhaps counterintuitively, given its single cutaway and longer scale length, high-register bluesy bends are easier to execute on the Falcon, though its slightly larger fretwire helps.

Compared to our own Center Block Panther (loaded with the same High Sensitive Filter'Tron pickups), the Falcon has a considerably bigger plugged-in voice in the neck position, with huge depth for honeyed jazz chords, but still plenty of top-end bite when you pick hard at the bridge during solos. The Panther's bridge pickup snarls louder with more punch, but that's where the centre block helps to give it an extra push.

Voices in some corners of the internet will tell you to ditch stock High Sensitive Filter'Tron pickups in favour of TV Jones alternatives, but we would advise against acting in haste. The Japanese units sound very good indeed; they are a little more brash and strident (and certainly higher output) than the TV Jones Classics on the Country Gentleman, but some players may prefer this and we can state from experience that they work brilliantly in a live-band context. The Country Gent's pickups are a little softer, smoother and sweeter, but the Japanese Filter'Trons can certainly do sweet too, just as the TVs can do brash twang with the right amp tone! When it comes to pickups, it's a case of following your ears, not the crowd.

Predictably, the Country Gent's lack of f-holes and thinline body make it more resistant to feedback than the Falcon, which really does bloom easily into a midrange-y howl. If you get the gain and volume balance right you can control it and make it musical, but we suspect that this isn't the guitar for playing small pub stages in close proximity to loud amplifiers if you use any kind of drive.

Though most Gretsch demos on YouTube default to *Mystery Train*-style rockabilly or something similar, there's so much more to both of these guitars. While we'd still head straight to the Center Block series for a Gretsch that does balls-to-the wall rock, in a contemporary context an instrument such as either of these models is a wonderful paintbrush for creating expansive soundscapes in conjunction with washes of delay and reverb.

You get a lot more clarity, harmonic complexity and treble out of a Filter'Tron or TV Classic than most other humbuckers for a start, but in all positions it's a kind of soft, sweet treble that doesn't sound thin or harsh. The treble bleed on the master volume of both instruments works as advertised, with a noticeably brighter tone when you roll back the level than with the individual pickup volume controls.

The Country Gent's period-correct features such as the mute and standby switch are useful, too; the latter makes a half-decent killswitch, while the former's ability to deaden the sustain of just three strings at a time (either the low or high set) and keep them in tune while the others ring allows you to create some really interesting sounds, particularly with raked arpeggios and stabbed chords into cavernous ambience.

KEY FEATURES

### Gretsch G6136T-BLK Players Edition Falcon

- **PRICE** £2,799
- **DESCRIPTION** Hollowbody six-string electric guitar, manufactured in Japan
- **BUILD** Laminated maple top, back and sides with ML bracing, maple neck with 12-inch (305mm) radius ebony fingerboard, pearloid thumbnail inlays, 22 medium jumbo frets, Graph Tech Tusq XL nut
- **HARDWARE** Gold Grover Imperial tuners, pinned Rocking Bar bridge, String-Thru Bigsby B6GP vibrato tailpiece
- **ELECTRICS** 2x High Sensitive Filter'Tron humbucking pickups, master volume with treble bleed, no load master tone control, individual pickup volume controls, three-position pickup selector switch, Squeezebox paper-in-oil capacitors
- **SCALE LENGTH** 25.5"/648mm
- **NECK WIDTH** 42mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 20mm at first fret, 22mm at ninth fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35mm at nut, 53mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 7.5lbs/3.4kg
- **FINISHES** Black gloss urethane (as reviewed) or White (G6136T-WHT)
- **CONTACT** Fender GBI 01342 331700 **www.gretschguitars.com**

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Bigsby string changes are no longer awkward thanks to the String-Thru tailpiece
+ High Sensitive Filter'Trons sound excellent
+ Stunning looks and excellent build quality

- Difficult to control in close proximity to a loud amp

*What's even cooler than a White Falcon? A black version that's pre-modded for the road*

8/10

KEY FEATURES

### G6122T-62 Vintage Select Edition '62 Chet Atkins Country Gentleman

- **PRICE** £2,599
- **DESCRIPTION** Hollowbody six-string electric guitar, manufactured in Japan
- **BUILD** Laminated maple top, back and sides with parallel tone bar bracing and simulated f-holes, maple neck with 12-inch (305mm) radius ebony fingerboard, pearloid thumbnail inlays, 22 vintage-style frets, zero fret, bone nut
- **HARDWARE** Gold Grover Imperial tuners, pinned Rocking Bar bridge, Bigsby B6G vibrato tailpiece, dual foam string mutes
- **ELECTRICS** 2x TV Jones Classic humbucking pickups, master volume with treble bleed, three-position tone switch, three-position pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume controls, standby switch, Squeezebox paper-in-oil capacitors
- **SCALE LENGTH** 24.6"/625mm
- **NECK WIDTH** 43mm at nut, 53mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 19mm at first fret, 21mm at 9th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 36mm at nut, 53mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 8lbs/3.6kg
- **FINISHES** Walnut stain gloss urethane (as reviewed) only

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Pinned bridge contributes to excellent general stability
+ Easier to use at high volume than the Falcon
+ TV Jones pickups have mellow, vintage tones in spades

- Upper-fret access limited

*For authentic 60s jangle and 50s twang, there are few more evocative choices, and this is almost certainly the best Country Gentleman that Gretsch has ever made*

9/10

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# Beginners' Luck

Grown-up Gretsches at pocket-money prices? **HUW PRICE** finds out what the new-for-2016 Streamliner Collection has to offer

GRETSCH
GRETSCH
Bigsby

Guitar AWARD CHOICE 9/10

# Gretsch Streamliner Collection

**LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...**

### G2655T Streamliner Center Block Junior Double Cutaway

Slightly bigger than a Les Paul, the Bigsby-fied **Epiphone Wildcat £379** has a solid mahogany centre-block. Also check out the **Hagstrom Viking TC £432** and the **Ibanez AS73T-TCR £381**.

The Streamliner moniker arrived in the Gretsch catalogue in 1955 with a range of affordable instruments descended from the earlier Electromatics. Both names have, of course, since reappeared in the Gretsch product line, and now 2016 sees the new Streamliner Collection arrive in the form of a trio of guitars that are very competitively priced indeed.

As you'd expect from instruments that originate from the same series, several features are common throughout. The control layouts are identical, and by Gretsch standards, things are relatively simple. There's a three-way selector switch with a master volume control on the lower horn – Gretsch's original solution for easy access to the volume control with Bigsby-equipped guitars always was the best. Each pickup has its own volume control, and the tone control is shared. The colours may differ, but all have clear plastic knobs that are not unlike Gibson's early tall speed knobs.

The bodies, fingerboards and headstocks have white plastic binding, and headstocks are scarf jointed to the necks. The nickel-plated hardware includes Gretsch's Adjusto-Matic bridge and unbranded die-cast tuners. Teardrop-shaped pickguards are fitted on all the guitars in the range, in addition to 'synthetic bone' nuts, 1950s-style pearloid block inlays and rosewood fingerboards.

The fretwork is excellent on all three guitars, but, despite the published specifications, I would describe the fretwire as fairly low and narrow, rather than 'medium jumbo'. So, let's get into some of the model specifics...

### G2655T Streamliner Center Block Junior Double Cutaway

I thought I'd start off with the smallest guitar and work my way through the range, so first up is the Streamliner Center Block Double Cutaway, which I'll refer to as the Junior. It's a scaled-down version of Gretsch's earliest double-cutaway design, but the lightweight spruce centre-block provides an interesting twist: the intention is to solidify the structure and make the Junior less susceptible to feedback at high gain and volume than traditionally constructed Gretsch guitars.

With its licensed B50 Bigsby, clean look and stripped-back controls, the Junior has the visual vibe of a contemporary boutique semi-solid. That's hardly surprising when you consider how many styling cues manufacturers of such guitars have borrowed from Gretsch over the years.

*With its licensed B50 Bigsby, clean look and stripped-back controls, the Junior has the vibe of a boutique semi-solid*

Gretsch used this shape on the 6122Jr Junior Gent model, and some will note its similarity to Jack White's modified Anniversary Junior. It's a cool concept, because you get the feel and sound of a semi-solid without the bulk.

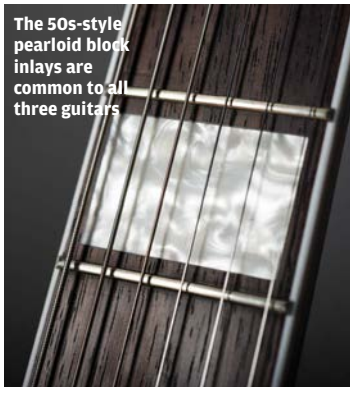
### In use

All three Streamliners have fairly generic U-profile necks of medium depth. The body's shape and size make the Junior comfortable to hold, but choose your strap carefully: there's a little neck dive due to the weight of the tuners.

There's enough acoustic tone on offer to make playing unplugged an enjoyable experience, and the even string-to-string balance and impressive sustain come courtesy of that centre-block. Some of the Adjusto-Matic bridge saddles are a little bit buzzy, but the Junior's easy-playing action and rock-solid tuning are impressive: the Bigsby has enough travel to wobble chords about nicely, and you can get fairly vigorous with the arm before things begin to drift.

Soon after plugging in, you'll realise that it's 'Tron' by name but not by nature, because the Broad'Trons sound very different to traditional Filter'Trons; despite appearances, these units sound much closer to standard humbuckers. The bridge pickup is by far the most powerful and has a throaty midrange bark rather than a retro twang. The neck position sounds clearer and rounder, and allows more of the Junior's semi-solid woodiness to come through.

The low-set humbuckers on the Single Cutaway are great for jazz


The 50s-style pearloid block inlays are common to all three guitars

The Junior's licensed B50 has ample travel

Both pickups have a fairly high output and, with the factory setup, the bridge can push vintage-style valve amps into a rough and slightly splatty overdrive. Lowering the pickups to put more distance between the coils and the strings helps the Junior sing a lot more sweetly and sound more characteristically Gretsch-like.

Through an overdrive pedal, the Junior produces big great-sounding powerchords, crunchy riffs and bluesy solo tones. Played clean, it has a quite delicate roundness on the neck setting and a lovely, phasey scoop with both pickups engaged. I couldn't quite dial out the bridge pickup's raspy bark, so this is maybe one for those with rockier inclinations.

As it's a semi, overdrive at medium volumes brings controllable feedback, and happily it's squeal-free. The tone control can be used to dial in a 'woman' tone on the neck pickup with no loss of clarity, but it's less useful on the bridge pickup, where it can make things sound muddy and indistinct.

## G2622 Streamliner Center Block Double Cutaway

Although this guitar may appear to sit squarely in ES-335 territory, there are important structural differences. Gretsch uses spruce rather than maple for its centre-block, which adds far less weight. The block is also chambered, so it does its job of adding rigidity, but Gretsch is able to keep those wide-open spaces inside the body. It's the sort of thing Chet Atkins was begging Gretsch for in the 1950s, so he probably would have approved.

Most of the Double Cutaway's ingredients are identical to the Junior's, with the exception of the gold knobs and the tailpiece. Although it performs exactly the same function as a regular stop tailpiece, the Gretsch designers have cleverly incorporated the iconic V motif seen on the Cadillac tailpieces of the White Falcon and Penguin models.

### In use

It's impossible to say with absolute certainty whether it's the larger body cavities or the absence of a Bigsby, but the Double Cutaway's acoustic tone is more pleasing than the Junior's. The body resonates more, it's louder and there's more bass content.

The very qualities that promise so much when the Double Cutaway is played unplugged may be thought by some to work to its disadvantage when played through an amp. When you combine a more full-bodied resonance with pickups that are relatively dark compared to vintage Filter'Trons and DeArmond Dynasonics, it can result in a slightly muffled tone.

In practice, this means the Double Cutaway sounds more like a Gibson-style semi than it does a traditional Gretsch. Depending on your point of view, this isn't necessarily a bad thing – and who can blame Gretsch for wanting to break the bonds of the rockabilly straightjacket? Again, lowering the neck humbucker helps it sound sweet and clear, but I'm inclined to think that the bridge pickup's 9.3k-ohm DC resistance is a tad overcooked. 9.3k (bridge) and 7.8k (neck) readings were consistent across all three guitars.

Numbers aside, the pickups combine to really good effect in the middle position, and this is where all three Streamliners sound their most Gretsch-like in the traditional sense. Used together, the midrange is scooped out, which helps to emphasise the bass and treble frequencies; so if you want to play fingerstyle, or hybrid picking is your thing, this is the setting to use.

Although it seems counterintuitive, I prefer the Junior for clean and the Double Cutaway for dirt. Through a cranked amp or overdrive pedal, the Double Cutaway sounds huge and combines familiar semi-solid characteristics with an extra serving of harmonic chime and woody depth.

Despite the bigger body outline, the Double Cutaway seems more resistant to feedback than the Junior. Overtones bloom pleasingly on top of fundamental frequencies, as feedback eases over held chords and single notes. However, I found the Double Cutaway's sustain characteristics a little unpredictable: some notes hang on indefinitely, while others fade fast.

## G2420T Streamliner Single Cutaway Hollow Body With Bigsby

The big boy of the range is fully hollow. Given that the other Streamliners have centre-blocks, some trestle bracing >

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

### G2622 Streamliner Center Block Double Cutaway

One solid centre-block option with two humbuckers could be the **Epiphone ES-339 £359**. If you want a Bigsby-style trem, check out the **Ibanez AS73T Artcore £385**. The **Eastwood Classic 6 WH £350** looks striking with its white finish and gold hardware.

### G2655T Streamliner Single Cutaway Hollow Body With Bigsby

The **Ibanez AF75TDG £439** is a big hollow singlecut with a Bigsby-style trem, and the **Ibanez AGR63T £419** has narrow pickups and is available in orange. A trem-less option could be the **Stagg Jazz Arch Top Semi £345**.

# Behind The Liners

## Gretsch product manager Adam Bowden-Smith gives us the skinny...

**Q How did these models come about?**
"This is a price point we haven't existed in previously. Now, we have the right R&D team and the right factories to do it properly, rather than simply taking guitar bodies and parts off the peg from a Far Eastern factory and putting our brand on it. The tailpieces and pickups were designed exclusively for these guitars. So they have a lot of Gretsch DNA, combined with features that are all-new."

**Q Can you tell us more about the pickups?**
"They resemble some we used to use on the old 5120, but they are completely brand new. The Gretsch R&D team spent quite a long time going through prototypes made in-house in Scottsdale. The sound we were looking for was between a classic Filter'Tron and a PAF-style humbucker, but leaning more towards the Filter'Tron. So, Gretsch tonality with a broader sound, hence the Broad'Tron name. Once we were happy, we handed those specs over to a manufacturer in the Far East for mass production."

**Q Is the pickup voicing indicative of Gretsch's intention to move beyond its traditional fan base?**
"Not necessarily. We think Gretsch guitars are more versatile than perhaps they are perceived to be, and our sound fits perfectly between the other classic sounds that are out there. But at the same time, the size of the pickup determines the tone because the magnetic field is wider and less focused than a Filter'Tron's. We want to appeal to a broader range of people, who haven't previously heard our sound. Voicing the pickups the way we have gives them a taste of that sound without taking them too far away from familiar territory. We're inviting them into the Gretsch world through a familiar window."

**Q Has Gretsch's link with rockabilly been a mixed blessing?**
"That's a good way to put it. Brian Setzer has been a huge part of Gretsch's resurgence and success, but there is this pigeon-holing that has led some people to think Gretsches are just rockabilly guitars. Look back at the early days of rockabilly – very few of those players actually used Gretsches. Setzer bought his first Gretsch because of Eddie Cochran, but he ended up with the wrong pickups and history got rewritten!"

**Q The f-holes on these new models are really small...**
"They are, but like almost every feature on these guitars, they have some place in Gretsch history. We call those Baldwin-era f-holes, and they were a lot smaller than the oversized holes on older Gretsches. To get the bigger f-holes, orange and white finish options or the Filter'Trons of a full-fat Gretsch you will need to go to the next level up."

**Q Or the Streamliners could be modified instead?**
"We think it could become a big sub-culture, because they would make great modding platforms. There'll be loads of these guitars with new pickups, new tuners, new this and that, simply because they're so great. I just hope people will listen to these pickups first before changing them."

The Streamliners' headstocks are plain and tidy looking

The Junior's upper-fret access is superior to its siblings

*These Gretsches are so solidly made and well finished that there's plenty to enjoy for newbies and Gretsch die-hards alike*

or sound posts might have made things more series-consistent but, even so, I'm not complaining.

The bridges of vintage Gretsch archtops were supposedly held in position by downward pressure from the strings. Those who have spent entire gigs chasing these bridges around the tops of their guitars will be pleased to learn that this 'secured' design does not move. As well as conforming tightly to the curve of the top, the bridge posts protrude beneath the rosewood base and slot into locating holes. It's not exactly a pinned bridge, but the outcome is the same. Besides that, the fixtures and fittings here are exactly the same as on the other models.

### In use

Given that the Single Cutaway is the most 'traditionally' constructed Gretsch in this line-up, it's perhaps surprising that it's also the body that brings out the best from the Broad'Tron pickups. While it can't be said that the neck pickup setting sounds exactly like an old 6120, the big hollow body, combined with a floating bridge and a low-set humbucker, is a tried-and-trusted recipe for jazz tone.

It sounds mellow, woody and very balanced across the strings, and the slight shoutiness of the pickup can be tamed by rolling the volume control back just a smidgeon. Through a Fender Deluxe Reverb, I found it a very involving and enjoyable tone, and the extra range of the tension bar-less Bigsby allows you to do all those cool shimmers, slurs and dips.

Again, the middle setting's phasiness gets you closest to classic Gretsch tone, and dipping the neck volume to reduce the bass content gets you closer still. The bridge pickup doesn't sound as aggressive on this guitar, and much of that can be attributed to the distance it's set away from the strings. The guitar's neck and bridge sit high above the body, so there's a lot of air between

the strings and the pickups. This, combined with the inherently mellow tone of a bona fide hollowbody, ensures that the Single Cutaway sounds more old-school than its siblings.

It feeds back without much provocation, which is hardly surprising for a guitar of this type. As expected, there's not enough sustain for rock soloing, but the Single Cutaway delivers huge tones for rhythm work when overdriven.

As you'd expect in this sub-£400 price bracket, there are significant differences between the Streamliner instruments and their considerably more expensive equivalents in the Professional Collection. The current line of Electromatics is also sonically and aesthetically closer to the iconic Gretsch stylings of old. Having said that, what's really exciting about the Streamliners is their upgrade potential.

Modifying and customisation has long been an aspect of Gretsch culture, and it wouldn't take much to give these instruments the hotrod treatment. Sourcing and installing a set of metal 'G-arrow' knobs would be a simple and affordable upgrade. The same could be said for a vintage-style metal switch tip, and many will welcome the Streamliners' plainer looking headstocks.

Other upgrade possibilities might include the pickguard, bridge and tuners. You could even apply a waterslide decal with a pin-up person of your choice and you would have a killer-looking Gretsch that plays like a dream. But, most excitingly of all, the conventional humbucker dimensions of the Broad'Tron pickups open up a great plethora of possibilities for customisation.

None of the above should be taken as criticisms of the Streamliner Collection models in their standard forms. I wouldn't even be pondering these modifications if I didn't believe these guitars were more than good enough to justify the additional effort and expense.

There will always be compromises at the entry-level point, and I think the Gretsch guys have been very canny about exactly where those compromises have been made. Rather than skimping on the materials or the appearance, these Gretsches are so solidly made and well finished that there's plenty to enjoy for newbies and Gretsch die-hards alike.

KEY FEATURES

### G2655T Streamliner Center Block Junior Double Cutaway

- **PRICE** £395
- **DESCRIPTION** Semi-solid electric guitar, manufactured in Indonesia
- **BUILD** Laminated maple body with chambered spruce centre-block, nato set neck with medium U profile, 12" radius rosewood fingerboard with pearloid block inlays and 22 frets
- **HARDWARE** Licensed B50 Bigsby, Adjusto-Matic bridge, die-cast tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Broad'Tron humbucking alnico 5 pickups, master volume, master tone, invidual volume controls, three-way selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 628mm/24.75"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42mm at nut, 53mm at 12th fret
- **DEPTH OF NECK** 21mm at first fret, 23mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 34.5mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 2.85Kg/6.28lbs
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No
- **FINISHES** Walnut Stain, Black and Flagstaff Sunset (without Bigsby)

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Stylish design
+ Easy-to-manage size
+ Easy playability and stable tuning
+ Surprisingly sweet clean tones

– Overly aggressive bridge pickup
– Slightly neck-heavy

*The Streamliner with the most crossover appeal and the easiest body size to handle could be a killer with a few mods*

9/10

KEY FEATURES

### G2622 Streamliner Center Block Double Cutaway

- **PRICE** £350
- **DESCRIPTION** Semi-solid electric guitar, manufactured in Indonesia
- **BUILD** Laminated maple body with chambered spruce centre-block, nato set neck with medium U profile, 12" radius rosewood fingerboard with pearloid block inlays and 22 frets
- **HARDWARE** 'V' stoptail, Adjusto-Matic bridge, die-cast tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Broad'Tron humbucking alnico 5 pickups, master volume, master tone, invidual volume controls, three-way selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 628mm/24.75"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42mm at nut, 53mm at 12th fret
- **DEPTH OF NECK** 21mm at first fret, 23mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 34.5mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 2.9Kg/6.39lbs
- **LEFT-HANDERS** Yes (Flagstaff Sunset only)
- **FINISHES** Flagstaff Sunset, Torino Green and Walnut Stain (with Bigsby)

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Excellent natural resonance and overdrive tones
+ Traditional doublecut looks
+ Cool V-shape tailpiece
+ Easy playability and stable tuning

– Overcooked bridge pickup
– Uneven sustain across fingerboard

*Gretsch style and looks combined with regular semi-solid tones that respond well to overdrive*

8/10

KEY FEATURES

### G2420T Streamliner Single Cutaway Hollow Body With Bigsby

- **PRICE** £395
- **DESCRIPTION** Hollow electric guitar, manufactured in Indonesia
- **BUILD** Laminated maple body with chambered spruce centre block, nato set neck with medium U profile, 12" radius rosewood fingerboard with pearloid block inlays and 22 frets
- **HARDWARE** Licensed B50 Bigsby, Adjusto-Matic bridge, die-cast tuners
- **ELECTRICS** Broad'Tron humbucking alnico 5 pickups, master volume, master tone, invidual volume controls, three-way selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 628mm/24.75"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42mm at nut, 53mm at 12th fret
- **DEPTH OF NECK** 21mm at first fret, 24mm at 9th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 34.5mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3.33Kg/7.34lbs
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No
- **FINISHES** Flagstaff Sunset, Gold Dust and Aged Brooklyn Burst (without Bigsby)

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Classic Gretsch shape
+ Full-on Bigsby experience
+ Easy playability and stable tuning
+ Sweet and woody tone

– High-volume drive options limited
– A bit of an armful

*Comes closest to the classic Gretsch big hollowbody tradition for jazz, rockabilly and rock 'n' roll clean tones, as well as huge powerchords*

8/10

# Gretsch G6137TCB Panther

Delving back into the past and updating a traditional formula, the Panther is a Gretsch aimed at the modern age, as **HUW PRICE** discovers

**KEY FEATURES**

**Gretsch G6137TCB Panther**

- **PRICE** £2,830
- **DESCRIPTION** Semi-solid guitar, made in Japan
- **BUILD** Three-ply maple body with spruce centre-block, three-piece set maple neck, 22 frets, 12" radius rosewood fingerboard, Grover Sta-Tite tuners, Adjusto-Matic bridge and Bigsby vibrato
- **ELECTRICS** Two High Sensitive Filter'Tron pickups with master volume and tone, individual volume controls and three-way pickup selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 24.625"/626mm
- **NECK WIDTH** 42mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 19mm at first fret, 22mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35mm at nut, 50.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 4kg/8.8lbs
- **CONTACT** Fender GB&I 01342 331700 **www.fender.com**

Non-initiates may be inclined to pigeonhole Gretsch guitars as simply hot-rodded single-cutaway jazz boxes that are geared towards rockabilly revivalists and gothy 80s types. However, despite the outward appearances of its guitars, the company's history is peppered with innovative designs, radical construction techniques and unique features. Being Gretsch, however, these designs often had their quirks; it seems unlikely, for example, that the Tone Twister vibrato or the Floating Sound sustain enhancer will be revived...

Speaking of sustain, throughout his tenure as Gretsch's prime endorsee, Chet Atkins pleaded for more of it and less feedback. Gretsch tried installing soundposts and devised at least two variations on the 'trestle bracing' theme from 1958 onwards, but music was by this time getting louder and it was becoming obvious that traditional big-bodied hollow guitars simply couldn't cope. Gibson's ES-335, with its thin double-cut hollow body and its spruce centre-block, changed everything.

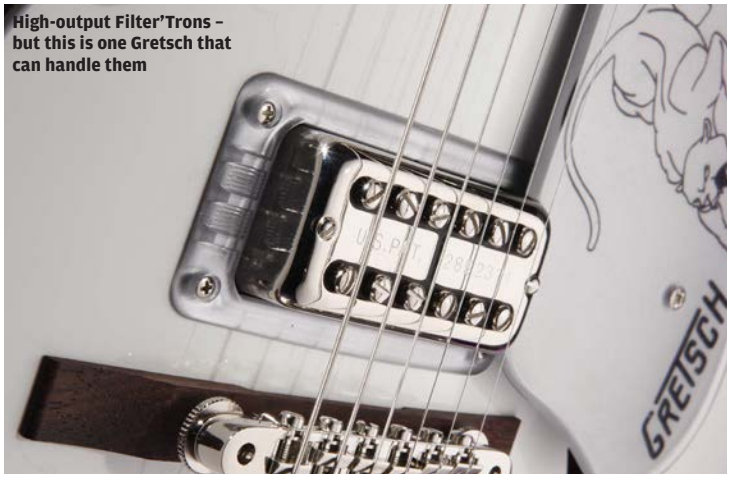
It proved a roaring success and even if Gretsch wanted to ignore it, Chet wouldn't let them (in fact, he had been requesting exactly the same thing for several years).

*The Panther has a solid spruce centre-block from neck to tail, with a weight relief chamber behind the bridge*

According to Gretsch, the Panther is a return to a theme, although it's unclear if the company is referring to an actual Gretsch model or a design idea that was never followed through.

The Panther has a solid spruce centre-block that goes from neck to tail with a weight relief chamber behind the bridge. Add to that a body depth of 1.75 inches, with a shorter-than-usual scale length of 24.625 inches, and it's pretty obvious which market Gretsch is gunning for.

Even so, it hasn't sacrificed that essential Gretschiness in order to target those customers. The fingerboard extension still floats high above the top to create the necessary clearance for the High Sensitive Filter'Tron pickups and a proper break angle over the bridge for the Bigsby. Better still, Gretsch has opted for the old Brooklyn formula of a three-ply top, back and

**Gretsch has pinned the floating Adjusto-Matic bridge to the body**

High-output Filter'Trons – but this is one Gretsch that can handle them

That all-important centre-block is just visible through the f-hole

sides so the thinner plates will resonate more easily.

The open-backed Grover Sta-Tite tuners are a great choice. They look fantastic, preclude neck heaviness and keep the tuning just as stable as any die-cast tuners would. Believe it or not, the control layout is simplified by Gretsch standards: there's a tone control rather than a mud switch and a master volume below the cutaway, as well as individual volume controls.

If you're used to Gretsches, you'll appreciate the master volume and its convenient location. If you're not, you can simply ignore it and use the individual controls. It's also worth noting that these modern Gretsch knobs feel very different to the vintage variety. The knurled texture is far rougher, so much so that you don't need to grip them. You can actually move them with the tip of one finger.

As for the neck profile, it feels very similar to this reviewer's 1963 Tennessean. It's a supremely comfortable C profile that deepens ever so slightly as you move up the neck. It's not chunky, but we wouldn't describe it as slim. In fact, the only criticism we could level regarding the White Panther's construction is the rosewood used for the bound fingerboard and bridge. We'd have preferred ebony ourselves, but even so, it's only an aesthetic thing – like wearing brown shoes with a blue suit.

Other less conspicuous concessions to modernity include Schaller strap locks, a top-mounted jack socket and an Adjusto-Matic bridge. The wooden bridge base is pinned in place through the top, so it won't move about however you play, and it extends beyond the centre-block in order to transfer vibrations to the rest of the guitar.

## Sound

Acoustic tones are bright, balanced and encouraging, but the question has to be whether the White Panther can cope with high volume levels. In short, it certainly can. Despite provocation from cascading gain stages, wah pedals, fuzzboxes and compressors, the White Panther behaves itself like a (country) gentleman. Of course, it does feed back, but no more than any other semi-solid. The pickups are high-output by Filter'Tron standards, but they're still brighter than PAF-style humbuckers. So long as your amp has enough headroom in the preamp stage, you can dial up some classic Gretsch clean tones. The bridge pickup chimes, the neck pickup has a woody jazziness and, in combination, the hint of phasey mid-scoop is ideal for picking duties.

*The most remarkable characteristic has to be the sustain. The Panther will hang on to any note as long as you want it to*

The White Panther can overdrive valve amps with ease and you may wish to roll back your treble settings a tad. The onboard tone control has a slightly limited range, so full roll-off is more akin to morphing from a Filter'Tron to a PAF than proper 'woman' tone. Even so, the defined voice of the pickups works well with high gain because you can pile on the dirt without losing clarity.

Powerchords and low-register riffs sound huge, especially in dropped tunings. But the most remarkable characteristic has to be the sustain; the White Panther will hang on to any note just as long as you want it to. Grinding away on the bridge pickup for the rhythm parts, then flipping over to the neck for solos is like going from Malcolm Young's tone to a pretty convincing version of an Angus sound.

## Verdict

Despite their many charms, Gretsch guitars have in the past seldom been described as 'easy to play'. They're quirky, and fans have had to learn to work around some of those quirks. The White Panther irons out the quirks without losing that essential Gretschiness. It delivers for woody-toned picking as well as high-gain shredding, so it should appeal to traditionalists and modern players alike. It's also supremely playable and so packed with sonic character that this must be far closer to what Chet Atkins had in mind. He probably would have complained that the pickups were too hot... but we're guessing he would have approved of everything else.

**Guitar Bass VERDICT**

+ Hugely impressive range of tones
+ Comfortable C-profile neck
+ Irons out Gretsch quirks
+ Bags of sustain

- We'd have preferred an ebony fingerboard and bridge

*The Panther is a wonderfully playable, versatile guitar that sacrifices none of the traditional Gretsch charm*

**9/10**

### LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

**Gibson Chris Cornell ES-335**

This **ES-335 £2,099** features a Bigsby and Jason Lollar Lollartron pickups – his take on the Filter'Tron theme. The Gibson factory uses a Plek machine on the frets, so it'll be smooth.

**The Duesenberg Starplayer TV Vintage £1,214** has an arched laminated spruce top with flamed maple back and sustain centre-block, maple neck and rosewood fretboard. The neck has a dual-action truss rod, and the pickups include a Duesenberg DP90 and a humbucker.

GRETSCH
VOX
Bigsby

Vintage BENCH TEST

# 1955-56 GRETSCH 6131 JET FIREBIRD

Some mystery surrounds the exact date that this stunning Oriental Red Jet Firebird was made. **HUW PRICE** investigates

Dating this guitar is tricky, because only a small shred of the original label remains in the control cavity. We can be certain this fine instrument is a Jet Firebird because of the Oriental Red Nitron plastic covering on the front. Gretsch also manufactured drums, and the company started gluing drum wrap material over the pressed plywood tops of 'solidbody' models such as this, the Sparkle Jet and the early black Duo Jets.

Jet Firebirds sometimes had their serial numbers etched onto the control covers, but this example doesn't have one so its serial number is long gone. Fortunately, there are other ways to establish the manufacturing date of vintage Gretsch guitars because a diligent researcher called Edward Ball has correlated Gretsch's ever-changing features with specific production batches.

In his book *Ball's Manual Of Gretsch Guitars 1950s*, Edward reveals the earliest '55 model 6131 Jet Firebirds were actually made in 1954. They can be distinguished from the later versions by the white Gretsch logo on their teardrop-shaped pickguards and bullet-shaped red truss-rod access covers. The 1956 model Jet Firebird had a black pickguard with no logo and a longer black teardrop truss-rod cover. For '57, Gretsch went to hump block fingerboard markers with G-stamped knobs.

This 6131 has only ever been fitted with the longer truss-rod cover, and two of the knobs are later replacements with the G stamp. I pulled out the two volume pots and found they were 1Ms made by IRC during the 42nd and 43rd week of 1955 (ie, October). There is a possibility that this guitar was made very late in 1955, but Gretsch collectors would consider this a '56 spec Jet Firebird nevertheless.

Although Waverly tuners enjoy an exalted reputation these days, those fitted to vintage Gretsches are not everyone's cup of tea. All the tuners on this guitar are original with straight shafts and no corrosion of the chrome plating. Having said that, some are extremely stiff to turn, which makes tuning up a bit of a chore – especially with the Bigsby fitted. On the positive side, once this guitar is in tune, it tends to stay in tune.

One of the biggest issues with old Gretsches is gassing off. You could say it comes to all of us with age, but in Gretsch's case we're talking about the gasses emitted by deteriorating celluloid parts. Thankfully, Jet Firebirds weren't fitted with tortoiseshell celluloid pickguards like the Round Up. However, celluloid was used for the pickup risers, and the bridge riser has started to degrade.

*Those Nitron tops were pretty tough, so the front of the guitar retains its vibrant scarlet colour*

In the process, it is eating into the bridge pickup's plating and creating a layer of green-ish oxidisation. It's still at the stage where this tarnishing could be polished off to restore the metal, and some lookalike risers made out of a more stable material could replace the originals. Putting the old ones in an airtight bag for posterity would ensure that this otherwise clean guitar doesn't deteriorate any further.

The Bigsby and the Tune-o-matic bridge are non-original. Factory fittings for this model would have included a G stamp tailpiece and a Melita bridge – arguably the first guitar bridge with individually >

*Below* **The black lacquer has worn away to reveal the mahogany used for the body**

**Gretsch used celluloid risers for DeArmond pickups and they tend to deteriorate. This 'gassing off' can damage the lacquer and the metal parts, as seen here. Fortunately, replacement risers are available and this pickup could probably be polished up, but action is required**

KEY FEATURES

## 1955-56 Gretsch 6131 Jet Firebird

- **SCALE LENGTH** 625mm/24 5/8"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42.5mm at nut, 52.5mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 21.5mm at first fret, 24mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 37.5mm at nut, 53.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3.53kg/7.7lbs
- **FINISH** Oriental Red front with black body and neck
- **PRICE** £5,250
- **CONTACT** Vintage Guitar Boutique 0207 729 9186 **www.vintageguitarboutique.com**

*Above* **The top is in fine condition because it was never lacquered. It's the same Nitron plastic covering that Gretsch used on its drum kits**
*Opposite page, top* **The tone control features stacked potentiometers with two capacitors**
*Bottom* **The neck is mahogany too, as you can see from this area of playwear at the cowboy end**

adjustable string intonation. Both items are in the case, along with what appears to be a period strap. Although it's understandable that any Gretsch player might want a Bigsby, the Melita has most likely been retired for practical reasons.

It's possible it was swapped because a shift in the neck angle meant it wouldn't adjust downwards far enough for a low playing action. Under black light, some filling in and touch-up can be seen along the body edge of the heel, which supports this theory. Also, the replacement bridge is adjusted about as low as it can go.

However, it's also possible the Melita bridge was replaced because the bottom is curved. If you lay it on its base, it rocks along its length – just like some Gibson ABR-1s after decades of downward pressure has bent them out of shape. This flattens the string radius relative to the fingerboard radius and can adversely affect playability.

Although it has been well used, this Gretsch is in fine shape. Those Nitron tops were pretty tough, so the front of the guitar retains its vibrant scarlet colour, and chips and checking will never become an issue.

The playwear is confined mostly to the back, where the mahogany can be seen through chips and rub-through around the edges. There's more exposed wood on the edges of the neck up at the cowboy end, but overall it's a vibey look, and this Jet Firebird feels clean and solid. Best of all, there's no trace of binding rot.

### In use

The body may have extensive chambering, but it's as weighty as a regular solidbody – albeit a fairly light one. The neck has a palm-filling deep D profile and these appear to be the original skinny frets. The binding nibs may have worn away, but the frets themselves have plenty of life left in them.

*To my ears, these pickups sound remarkable, and they have a completely unique sound*

There is relatively little break angle over the bridge and the low E does tend to pop out of its saddle slot when it's strummed or picked with force. The action is fairly low and a slight upwards adjustment may help to prevent this without compromising playability. The groove in the low E saddle could also be filed a tad deeper – and although neither procedure would cure the underlying issue of the neck angle, it would be a perfectly good workaround. Even as supplied, this guitar plays way better than most of the 50s and 60s Gretsches I have encountered.

Chet Atkins famously disliked DeArmond pickups. I'm certainly not qualified to question the great man's opinion, but I do struggle to understand it. To my ears, these pickups sound remarkable, and they have a completely unique sound.

For starters, they combine serious output level with an ultra-clear and high-fidelity tone. >

MSZ

Bigsby
PAT. NO. D-165120

The treble is wide open but extremely smooth and defined, and this is mixed with warm mids and a bass response that can punch holes. String-to-string balance is very even, too.

Maybe Chet didn't appreciate the way these pickups can push a valve amp into overdrive but, let's face it, that's exactly what most of us enjoy these days. Fortunately, this guitar doesn't muddy up when you turn down, and in clean mode the bridge pickup has a Tele-like twangy cut that's both funky and countrified.

I'm surprised that more jazz players aren't hip to these DeArmonds in the neck position. There's a mellow and bell-like roundness, along with a lively and articulate response. As is so often the case on guitars with contrasting bridge and neck pickup sounds, the middle position provides a third distinct tone.

A slightly hollow phasiness seeps into the sound and there's just a hint of honk in the upper-mids. Roll back the tone control very slightly, reach for the thumb pick and you'll be rewarded with utterly authentic mid-50s Travis picking and rockabilly goodness – no slapback necessary. You can fine-tune the sound by re-balancing the pickups using the individual volume controls, but best of all is the solid thwack you get off the low E string – even when you palm mute.

However, it's not all retro, because this guitar scythes through overdrive. Powerchords are enhanced by jangly treble and you probably couldn't get the low end to mush out even if you tried. There's even enough sustain to solo without having to try too hard, but the transient attack is livelier by far than any sort of Les Paul, and you might struggle to get the snarl of a P-90 or even a Filter'Tron.

If you stand too close to a cranked-up amp, you can get some squeal, but DeArmonds are known for that. It's sometimes caused by the mechanical bits dangling beneath – and you can go a long way towards curing the problem by wrapping the parts tightly with elastic bands.

*It's one of the most drool-worthy and charismatic vintage guitars I have ever laid eyes upon*

Gretsch had a lot of trouble with neck joints, particularly with the solidbody models. It was factory policy to simply replace necks with current production necks when guitars were returned for warranty repairs. Therefore, it's quite exciting to see a mid-50s Jet Firebird with its original neck complete with block markers rather than thumbnails.

Ideally, this guitar would at some point be treated to a neck re-set, but it's wonderfully playable as it is. To my eyes, it's one of the most drool-worthy and charismatic vintage guitars I have ever laid eyes upon, and in this instance, the quirky Gretsch controls make complete sense. It's an absolutely superb instrument.

*Opposite page* **A Tune-o-matic has replaced the original Melita bridge and there's a Bigsby in place of the G tailpiece**
*Top left* **The extensive body chambering can be seen inside the control cavity**
*Above left* **All that's left of the original label is this tiny section of the border**
*Above right* **Both the replaced parts are kept safely in the original case and there's even a vintage leather strap**

VOX
GRETSCH

Vintage BENCH TEST

# '63 GRETSCH DUO JET

This classic rock 'n' roller beloved of AC/DC's Malcolm Young has a few issues but, as **HUW PRICE** discovers, it's a super-cool vintage model...

Although Round Ups, Jet Firebirds and Duo Jets are sometimes referred to as 'solidbody' guitars, they're actually semi-solid designs. This double-cutaway Duo Jet dates from 1963 and is far from mint; in addition to a small area of missing neck binding near the headstock and snapped pickup rings, it has recently undergone a headstock repair. Happily, the luthier did a decent job and the lacquer touch-up matches quite well.

The factory label is glued to the back of the switch cavity cover and the serial number corresponds to 1963, but the model number has been changed from 6129 to 6128. A pen was used to write an 8 over the 9, and although 6128 is correct for a Duo Jet, 6129 was the model number Gretsch used for the Sparkle Jet. The factory had probably run out of 6128 labels. Duo Jets of this era had black lacquer-finished tops and this one shows extensive crazing. The all-important neck angle is good and there's plenty of downward adjustment potential if needed, but the break angle over the pinned bridge is a bit marginal. The neck feels narrow across the fingerboard and tapers from slim-ish at the nut end to fairly clubby at the body joint. The narrowness and full round curve create a slightly bulbous feel and it's not the sort of profile you'd find on a modern guitar. Although it doesn't have the original case, all the original parts are in situ, including the gold-plated Filter'Tron pickups and open-gear Grover tuners.

*The all-important neck angle is good and there's plenty of downward adjustment potential*

## In use

Let's get the worst bit out of the way. If you think >

KEY FEATURES

### 1963 Gretsch Duo Jet

- **SCALE LENGTH** 622 mm/24.5"
- **NECK WIDTH** 41mm at nut, 53mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 19.5mm at first fret, 25mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35.5mm at nut, 48mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3.4kg/7.4lbs
- **FINISH** Black
- **CONTACT** Cranes Music 02920 398215 **www.cranes.co.uk**

**The recent headstock repair looks decent enough and the original open-gear Grover tuners are present**

The Duo Jet's lacquer finish exhibits plenty of crazing and no shortage of playing wear

*Above left* **Duo Jets from this era feature a zero fret**
*Above right* **The Burns vibrato doesn't exactly make for rock-solid tuning stability but otherwise, there's plenty to like here**

the tuning stability of Bigsbys can be wayward, the Burns vibrato on this Duo Jet makes a Bigsby feel as slick as a Floyd Rose. Then again, the plethora of pings emanating from the headstock area suggests that the vibrato unit may not be entirely to blame.

I compared the 60s Filter'Trons to some TV Jones Classics and the experience was not unlike pitting original Gibson PAFs against most modern boutique wannabes. The TV Jones units are very close to the Filter'Trons and sound wonderful in their own right, but the originals are clearer, woodier and more harmonically complex. It's well known that original Filter'Trons weren't wax potted, but TV Jones wax pots his – unless you request otherwise when ordering.

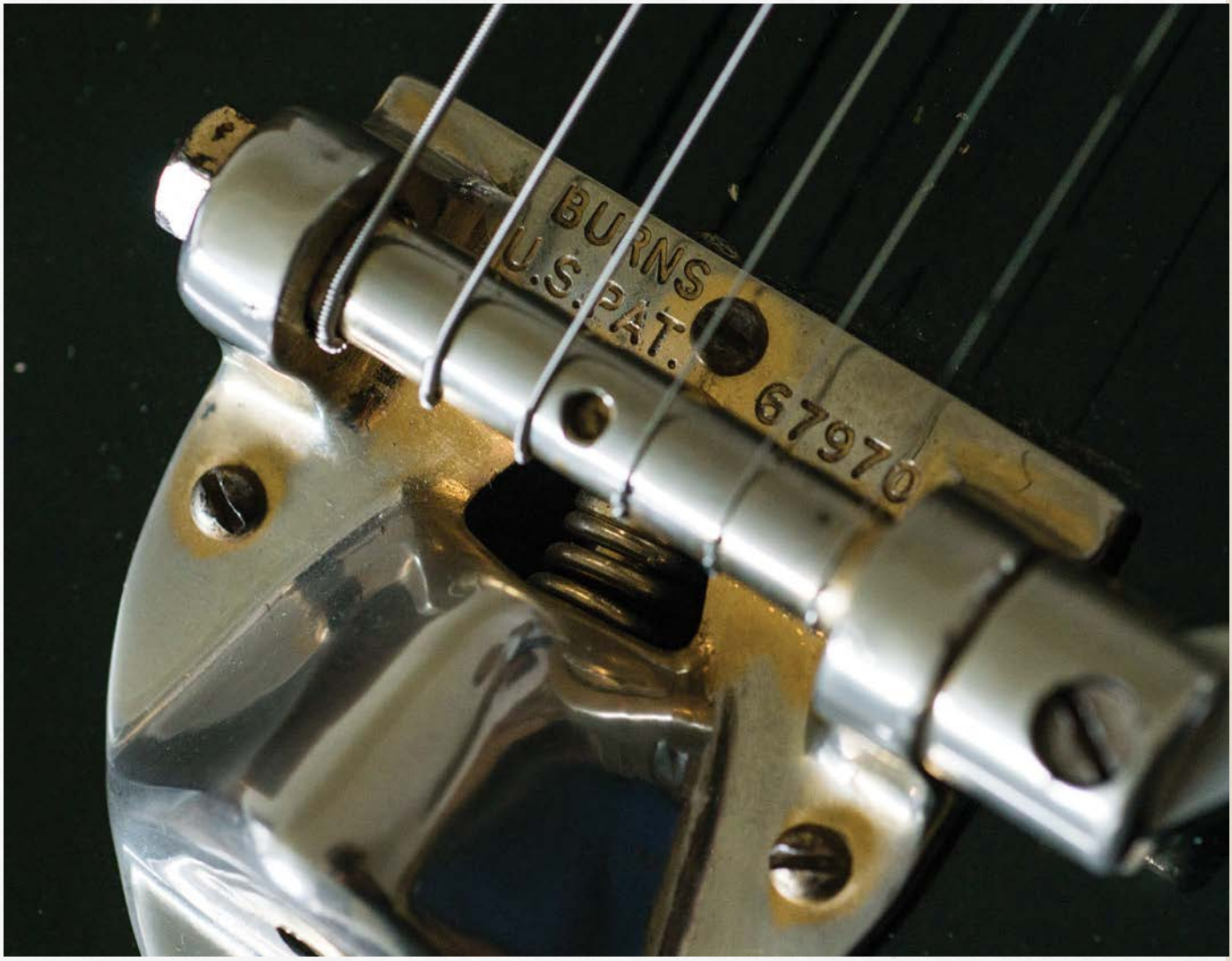
From the front, this looks like a compact and conventional instrument, but holding it creates a different impression. It feels more like a jazz guitar, because the body is quite deep and the neck joint is an archtop-type arrangement with a fingerboard extension that floats above the body. Consequently, the bridge sits high, and don't be deceived into thinking that twin cutaways facilitate SG-style access to the upper frets. The heel curve actually starts at the 13th fret.

*From the front, this looks like a compact instrument, but holding it creates a different impression*

At first, the Duo Jet may feel ungainly, but getting used to it takes no time at all. Even unplugged, it's a blast to play because the hollow body and general construction style make it sound and feel like a compact archtop acoustic. Perhaps Malcolm Young opted to leave the neck pickup out of his Duo Jet because the void acted as a soundhole!

Rather than use tone controls, Gretsch opted for a tone switch with two preset levels of treble roll-off. Implemented properly, it's a perfectly viable feature, but arguably Gretsch got it wrong from the get-go, then ran with it for years. Essentially, the capacitor values are unsuitable, so unless you're in the middle bypass position, the two options can be described as 'unusable' and 'even worse'. Gretsch switched to more suitable values a few years ago, but this Duo Jet still has its original capacitors. Good to see but bad to use.

Vintage Filter'Tron humbuckers have relatively low output levels. The bridge and neck pickups on




this Duo Jet are a vintage-correct 3.85k and 4k ohms respectively, so you will need to turn up your amp a tad higher than usual.

The tone is unique: part P-90 snarl, part Tele twang and part jazzbox clarity, coupled with outstanding touch response, a hint of trebly jangle and real complexity. If you like to thumb pick, simply stick the selector in the middle position and gratification will be instant.

So much for clean mode; when you crank up your amp or activate an overdrive, the Duo Jet roars. You get huge-sounding powerchords and grinding riffs with a layer of chime that allows chord voicings, subtle inversions and hammer-ons to scythe straight through the dirt.

Sustain in the conventional sense doesn't really enter into the equation, and the slightly percussive response is why the Duo Jet is such a stellar rock 'n' roll rhythm instrument. However, it also feeds back in the sweetest and most controllable manner, so you can get sustain, but you have to do some work in order to find the sweet spots.

*The tone is unique – part P-90 snarl, part Tele twang and part jazzbox clarity with outstanding touch response*

Despite a really nice setup, with low action and unexpectedly accurate intonation, some extra work would be required to make this a stage-worthy guitar. Peering closely at the vibrato, there appears to be an adjustment screw that would allow you to lock it off. Assuming string stretching and friction-point lubrication fails, I'd be inclined to disable the Burns. The tone capacitors could be replaced and I'd maybe swap the pickups to put the hotter one at the bridge. I'd also lower the polepiece screws and shim both pickups to get them closer to the strings. There's enough fingerboard width to use the bridge as intended and widen the string spacing, as well.

At first, this Gretsch didn't really grab me. But playing it for a while changed my mind and I really fell for it. It's far from collector's grade and there are issues, so to play and sound its best, a few sympathetic tweaks would be in order. But overall, there's genuine potential to turn this into a gig-able vintage guitar with sonic quality and tuning stability to match its super-cool looks.

*Above* **Some extra attention, possibly taking the Burns vibrato unit out of the equation, would be required to make this guitar gig-ready**

# THAT GREAT GRETSCH SOUND"

## AMPLIFIERS

# Gretsch Amplifiers

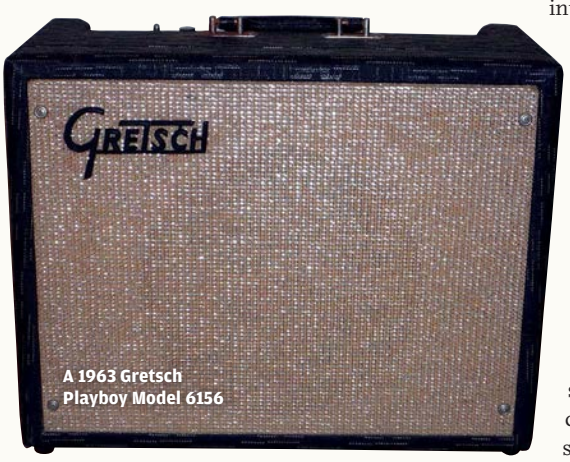
If Gretsch guitars are universally quirky as a breed, Gretsch amplifiers are utter oddballs. And we should consider that a good thing, in an age when the vast majority of existing vintage-inspired recreations are derived from the designs of just three major makers. **DAVE HUNTER** salutes some under-appreciated treasures

When we say 'Gretsch amp', of course what we mean is Valco, as that Chicago-based company manufactured all the units badged with the New York-based guitar brand throughout the golden years of production: the early 1950s to the late-1960s. As such, the circuits in Gretsch amps can be found in combos also branded as Supro, National, Airline, Oahu and a few others, although most were given distinct cosmetics, and even considerably different cabinet designs.

Valco came to life in the early 40s out of the remnants of the National Dobro company, which had been transplanted from California to Chicago in the mid-30s by legendary resonator-guitar manufacturer Louis Dopyera. The company was named using the first initials of its owners at the time (Victor Smith, Al Frost and Louis Dopyera, plus 'co' for 'company'). In its early years, it mainly cashed in on the Hawaiian music craze's shift from acoustic in the 30s to electric in the 40s, and supplied lap-style instruments, amplifiers, and even plenty of standard six strings that were sold under various brand names. While Gretsch was doing just fine making its own guitars, the company had no in-house facility for amp manufacturing. Valco products fit the bill very nicely for that critical second half of the 'set' – as most electric instruments were sold back in the day – and, wearing the well-tailored Gretsch look and logo, they were arguably the coolest of all the amps to roll out of the Chicago plant.

There were no really high-powered models from this maker, nothing that would stand in for a Fender Twin Reverb or a Marshall Super Lead. But many of the small-to-medium sized amps that populated the Gretsch/Valco line-up were capable of producing compelling and original tones that enabled them to stand shoulder to shoulder with much of what Fender, Marshall, Vox and Gibson produced of a comparable size. By that, I don't mean 'similar' sounds, but sounds that were equally cool in their own, individual ways.

> For many players, Gretsch history begins with the Chet Atkins models, and the amp range is no different



A 1963 Gretsch Playboy Model 6156

Valco was a large company that was clearly proud of its own work, but also one seeking to produce a great many products with an eye on the bottom line. It never copied others' circuits, and indeed incorporated many screwy topologies that you just don't see anywhere else. At the same time, the company employed many cost-saving measures in the parts department, using cheap ceramic-disc signal capacitors, along with power and output transformers that were smaller than the norm. Rather than making these amps sound inferior, however, such parsimony has left existing Valco-made Gretsches with a textured and attention-grabbing sound that many players really dig. Such originality is doubly appealing today, when even the most desirable vintage Gretsch models might be acquired for about half or even a third of the price of a comparable vintage Fender from the 50s or 60s.

There's a wide and somewhat disparate selection of vintage Gretsch amps to consider, but let's at least touch on a few of the more interesting and viable candidates here to get a taste for the look, sound and feel of these toothsome alternatives.

### 1955 Electromatic Twin Western Model 6169

For many players, Gretsch history begins with the Chet Atkins models, and the amp range is no different. The 6169 would take on more sedate (and arguably more marketable) looks after Chet rebelled against the similarly hokey 'cowboy junk' plastered across his signature-model guitars, but the white covering, tooled leather and longhorn silkscreening make this rendition pretty >

freakin' irresistible. The Twin Western 6169 produces around 14 watts from a pair of 6V6 output valves, with two juicy octal 6SC7 valves in the preamp and a 5Y3 rectifier. Its tone is rich, woody and warm, as you might expect, but there's a surprising crispness and clarity, too. In rough terms, the simple circuit is not unlike that of the early 50s Fender tweed Pro amp, although the 6169 benefits from the inclusion of a lusciously pulsing tremolo circuit, while drawing some added individuality from its odd complement of two elliptical 6x9-inch speakers, plus a four-inch tweeter (a configuration not unlike many all-in-one gramophones). In late-1956, this amp, now designated Model 6161, lost its Western garb for a more sedate – yet still extremely stylish – black vinyl covering with white 'snowflake' flecking. In 1957, it evolved into an almost entirely different circuit.

### 1963 Playboy Model 6156

The Gretsch Playboy of the early-to-mid-60s designated Model 6156 is definitive of what a lot of players love about mid-period Valco amps of the early 60s. The 6156 has one of the most lauded pedigrees in rock, with a circuit that's nearly identical to the Supro Model 24 that Jimmy Page purportedly used on many of his early Led Zeppelin recordings.

This one displays all the typical Valco build quirks – ceramic disc caps, rat's nest wiring – but by this time, the builder was using 6973s as its output valve of choice. A pair of them, cathode-biased, deliver 17 watts through the Playboy's under-spec'd 10-inch Jensen C10R speaker, but would be capable of achieving much more in the right configuration. These 6973s are easily mistaken for the EL84s they resemble visually if you don't check the numbers, but not only is their pin-out entirely different, they really sound nothing like that classic British small-bottle. Chalk to cheese. In general, they're a little thicker, meatier and grittier, still with plenty of sparkle on top but without the EL84s' glassiness, and a surprisingly good low end (when you get them pumping through a bigger cab, at least). As used in this Valco design, they offer a furious roar when cranked up, but without the fart-out compression you'd expect from a little combo such as this.

The Model 6156 of a year or two earlier carried a 12-inch speaker that was better able to make the most of the amp's potential. Or the Model 6161 Dual-Twin Tremolo was a 2x10 combo that also had room on the wider control panel to include an intensity knob alongside the Playboy's lone speed knob – and you could get it with reverb in its Dual-Twin Reverb format, the Model 6162. In any guise, it's worth considering installing modern replacement speakers to make the most of these amps' potential, although the original Jensens sound smoky and wonderful if in good condition. Or, opt for the smaller 6156 – which is usually cheaper, if you can find one – and treat it as a head: perch it on a 2x12 or 4x12 cab and take no prisoners.

### Mid-60s Compact Tremolo Reverb Model 6152

For more restrained home- and studio-based adventures, the Compact Tremolo Reverb Model 6152 is hard to beat. This small, single-ended combo delivers sweet Gretsch styling along with onboard reverb (mediocre, but interesting); tremolo (swampy and superb); and five watts RMS via a single 6V6 output valve. Some early models carried a single elliptical nine-inch, others a standard round eight-inch speaker, but later renditions upped that to a 12 – great for players who want to make the most of one of these nifty creations.

> For more restrained home- and studio-based adventures, the Compact Tremolo Reverb Model 6152 is hard to beat

I've noticed sellers asking about as much for these on the used market as some of the dual-6973 amps go for, and those are much, much mightier beasts in any of their guises. It might be that the inclusion of tremolo and reverb implies some added cache here, even though that reverb is underwhelmingly retro-sounding. Still, they are groovy amps, and a good score in both the style and tone stakes.

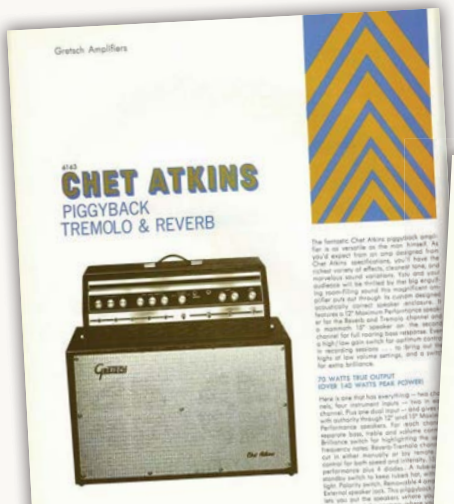
### Late-60s oddballs: the Twin Reverb

This later evolution of the Model 6162 is probably the most-seen larger Gretsch amp of the late Valco days. Valco seems to have made a lot of these in this upright 2x10 format with the back-angled silver control panel in 1967 and '68. In the first of those years, the company merged with the Kay Musical Instruments Corporation. By 1968, it was hitting the skids financially and on its way to going out of business.

Rather than the 6973 valves of the earlier 6162, this funky late-60s version had, by 1967, moved on to a pair of 6L6s, although it still put out only 25 watts at best, which would sound like even less than that through its pair of inefficient Jensen C10R speakers. Although they don't have quite the sartorial cool of the earlier Gretsch combos – kind of doing for that aesthetic what the silverface Fenders did for the blackface – they can still sound nifty. I had the pleasure of plugging into the Supro version while doing some mixing in the Boston, Massachusetts studio of producer Paul Q Kolderie (Pixies, The Lemonheads, Buffalo Tom, Uncle Tupelo), and that searing Valco grit paired with a splashy B-movie reverb and throbbing tremolo yielded exquisitely haunting tones.

### Modern alternatives

Few, if any, amps today do quite what the more interesting Valco-made Gretsch models did. For a time, the Victoria Amp Company produced a small range of Gretsch-branded combos for the modern Fender-owned company. These were not direct emulations of any particular Gretsch amps of old, but were nevertheless well-made, good-sounding alternatives with their own playfully retro style. The newly reconfigured Supro brand, now owned by the team behind Pigtronix effects pedals, has reissued some models under that badge, that represent designs of similar vintage Gretsch models – at least one of which even uses reissue 6973 output tubes. These amps are built with printed circuit boards and use many very different components, but are proving popular, and are decent value for US-made valve amps.



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# 20 Gretsch Tips

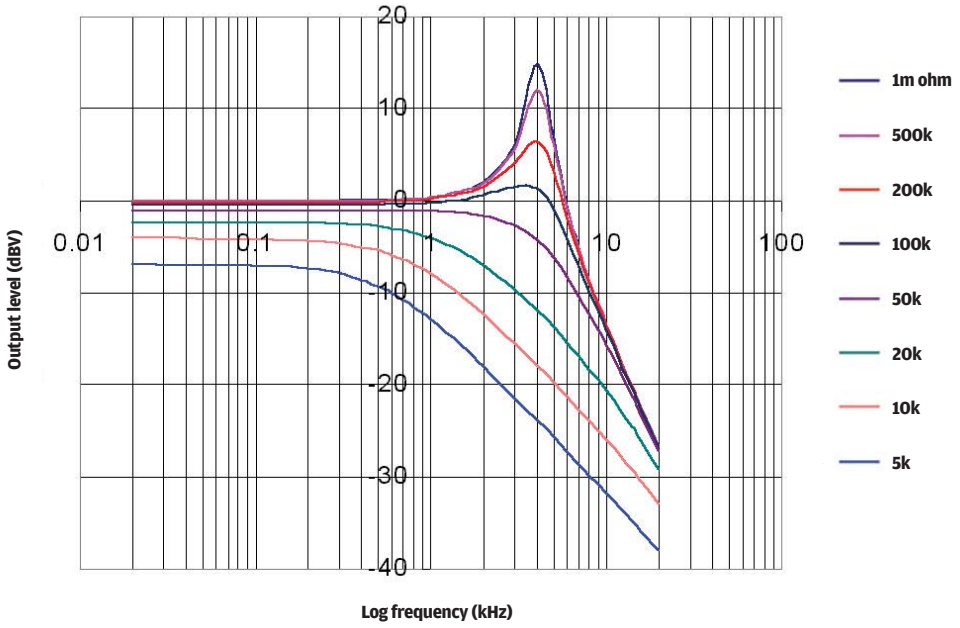
Fixin' to ride the Gretsch rodeo? **HUW PRICE** presents 20 modifications, upgrades and tone tips that will help you stay in the saddle...

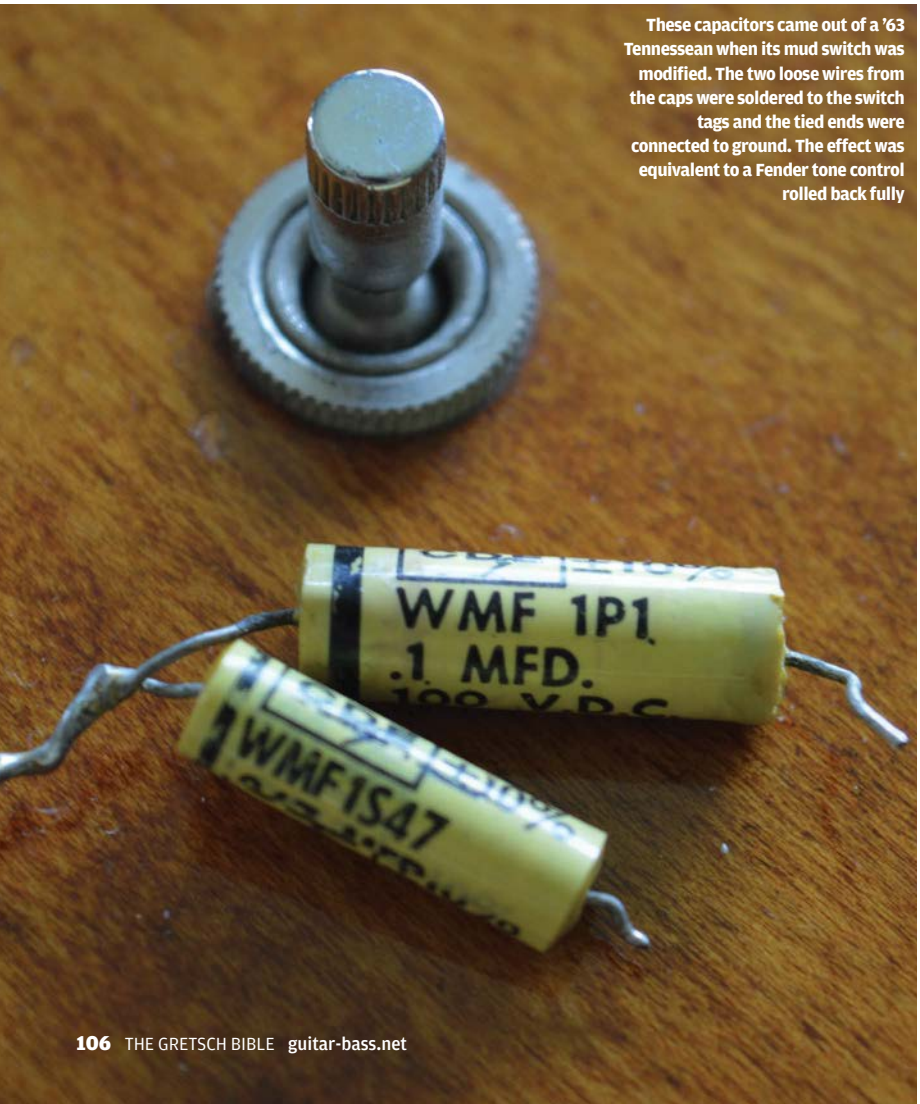
## 1 Pot swaps

Not all potentiometers are created equal, which is pretty obvious really. What's less obvious is the way you can select different values to tweak your tone. While you're at it, you may be able to upgrade the quality of your control pots, especially if your reissue Gretsch is fitted with the 16mm type that was used in the 1990s.

Higher-value volume pots accentuate the resonance peak at the treble roll-off frequency, which players perceive as a brightening of the tone. Fender used 250k pots to de-emphasise the resonance peak, as its pickups and amps were naturally bright. In contrast, 50s Gretsches with Dynasonics had 1M pots, and by '59, the company was matching Filter'Trons with 500ks. If your Gretsch sounds dark and you want more clarity and twang, try changing the volume pot to a 1M audio taper. For a darker, smoother tone, try 500k or 250k. Gretsches with tone (mud) switches, disengage the tone circuit in the middle position so they sound brighter. You can simulate the effect using a no-load tone potentiometer.

**Higher-value volume potentiometers accentuate the resonance peak at the cut-off frequency, which makes a guitar sound brighter. If your guitar seems too dull or bright, try changing the control pots before shelling out for replacement pickups**




**These capacitors came out of a '63 Tennessean when its mud switch was modified. The two loose wires from the caps were soldered to the switch tags and the tied ends were connected to ground. The effect was equivalent to a Fender tone control rolled back fully**

## 2 Mud mods

Gretsch's attempt at tone control in the late-50s and 60s was the 'mud switch' – so called because both settings rolled off so much treble, the sound turned to mud. Two tone capacitors were connected to a three-way switch that was 'off' in the middle setting. Vintage capacitor values were 0.1uF and 0.047uF, which produced two degrees of roll-off – dull and duller. Most Gretsch players simply ignore the mud switch, or at least try to avoid it, and Brian Setzer sometimes removes his entirely. In fact, one of the few name players who achieved anything vaguely useful from the mud switch was Stephen Stills. You can hear a great example on the solo of *Wooden Ships*.

After much persuasion, TV Jones talked Gretsch into changing the capacitor values to 0.012uF and 0.0039uF, which has finally turned the tone switch into the usable feature it should have been all along. The smaller cap skims off the twang, giving the Filter'Trons a Gibson PAF-style grind, and the bigger cap gets the neck pickup into clean jazz mode, or even 'woman' tone with added distortion. If it's done right, you get three usable sounds from the same pickup at the flick of a switch – not unlike a Fender Esquire.

The smaller cap skims off the twang, giving the Filter'Trons a PAF-style grind

TV Jones devised the English Mount to make it easier to fit his TV Classic Filter'Trons into lower-end Gretsches and other brands' guitars

The Ripley mount is a neat solution if you want to install vintage-style Filter'Tons in other guitars

**3 English Mounting Filter'Trons**

The original Filter'Tron pickups were designed to be screwed onto the guitar. There were holes at each end of the cover and no provision for height adjustment. This arrangement has made it hard to fit traditional Filter'Trons in Gretsches from the lower end of the product line, and guitars that were designed for Gibson-style humbuckers.

That's why TV Jones introduced 'English Mount' Filter'Trons – named after the man who inspired the design, Mr Jim English.

> TV Jones introduced 'English Mount' Filter'Trons – named after the man who inspired the design, Jim English

They come with PAF-style ears and surround rings that match M69 rings for Gibson-style guitars. For Electromatic 51 Series guitars, a more traditional Gretsch-style ring is available with the two extra holes for the suspension screws. If you want to mount a more traditional-style Filter'Tron in this way, all is not lost. You can take a length of aluminium or Perspex that fits between the polepieces and tap it for four holes. Two accommodate the fixing screws that go through the pickup cover, and the others are used for the surround screws. Alternatively, you could buy a ready-made Ripley mount.

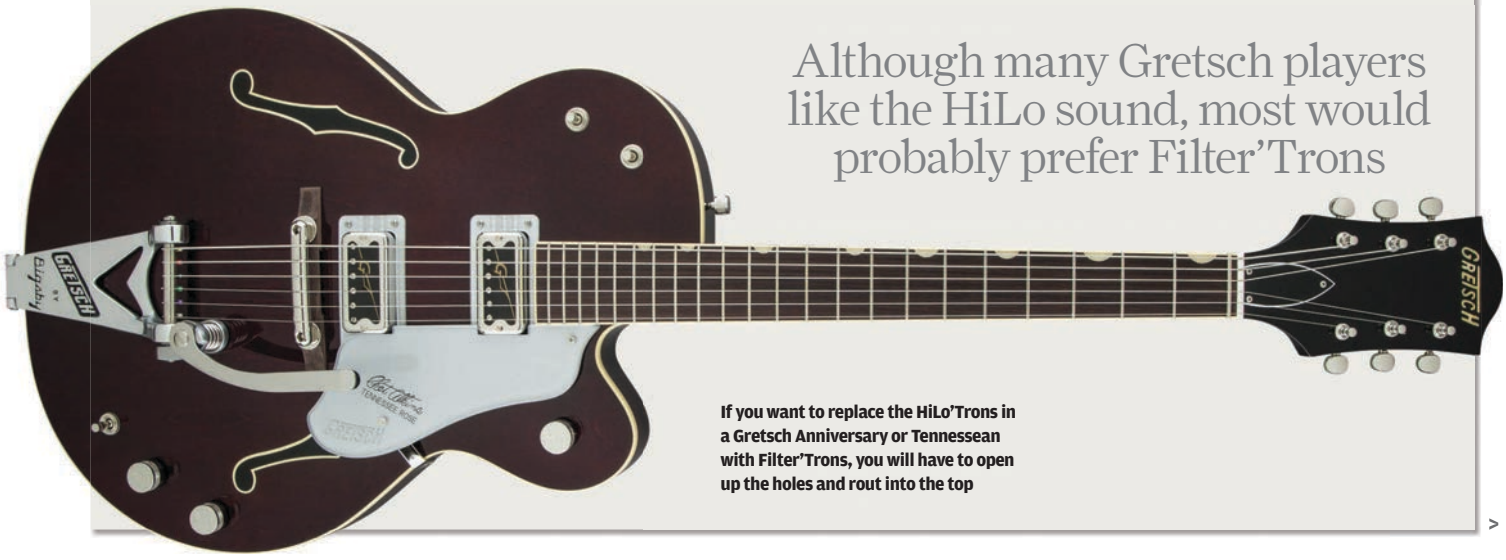
**4 HiLo to Filter'Tron conversion**

After mid-1960, upmarket Gretsches had Filter'Tron and Super'Tron humbuckers, while lower-priced models got HiLo single coils. Although many Gretsch players like the HiLo sound, given the choice, most would probably prefer to have Filter'Trons.

The build quality of the various Gretsch models was much of a muchness and pricing seemed to be based on pickups, binding and often ill-advised 'special features'. Consequently, many proud Tennessean and Anniversary owners have since retrofitted Filter'Tron pickups.

Unfortunately, they're not drop-in replacements and some routing into the top of the body is required, to accommodate the Filter'Tron's taller casings. Filter'Tron router templates are available from TV Jones for $10, or you could rout the cavities free-hand, as Gretsch did. This mod may devalue a vintage instrument from a collector's perspective, but its player appeal may be significantly enhanced.

> Although many Gretsch players like the HiLo sound, most would probably prefer Filter'Trons




If you want to replace the HiLo'Trons in a Gretsch Anniversary or Tennessean with Filter'Trons, you will have to open up the holes and rout into the top

**5 F-hole plugs for feedback**

Like all big hollow-bodied guitars, Gretsches are prone to feedback. In an effort to combat this and increase sustain, Gretsch experimented with sound posts and trestle bracing. Models such as the Tennessean, Country Gentleman and double-cutaway 6120s had sealed tops with fake f-hole decals.

If you like to play loud, it's unlikely you'll ever persuade a hollow Gretsch to become entirely feedback-free, but you may be able to control the feedback to some extent by using f-hole plugs. Various companies make them, and no specialist knowledge or tooling is required to fit them. They can also be removed at any time, so it's worth checking out Doug's Plugs and Victor Baker Guitars. If you're in a tight spot, you can simply tape over the f-holes, but this is not an ideal solution because you may end up damaging the guitar's finish.

If you like to play loud, it's unlikely that you'll ever persuade a hollow Gretsch to become entirely feedback-free

A Gretsch Electromatic with Doug's Plugs in the f-holes

**6 Customised pickguards**

Loads of Gretsch fans are into customising their stuff. Whether it's their car, their skin or their guitars, it's all part of the hot-rod culture. One of the most popular Gretsch modifications is the customised pickguard. Chet and Brian have had their names and logos on their pickguards, so why shouldn't you? It's also a cheap way of making an entry-level Gretsch look more upmarket. There's a remarkably talented chap in the US called Paul Setzer, who can make just about any pickguard you can dream up. Whether it's a perfectly accurate repro pickguard for a vintage restoration, or a steer's head, skull, viking longboat, or portrait of your pet dog, he can do it in any shape or colour you want. For more information, search for 'Setzer Signs' or email Paul at setzersigns@yahoo.com.

The Palm-O-Low may be ideal if you like a Bigsby but can't get along with any of the different arms

## 7 Bigsby arms

If the original springy vibrato figures prominently in your playing style, you may want to consider various options to make your Bigsby more comfortable, less intrusive or easier to use. The earliest Bigsbys had fixed arms, so they couldn't be swivelled out of the way. Many players would find this obtrusive but others, such as Darrel Higham, like to know where the arm is at all times, so a fixed arm is ideal.

Then there's the 'Chet' wire handle, with a bend that detours around the bridge. A bend in the arm allows it to swivel around as far as you want without fouling against the bridge, and you can see photos of Chet Atkins palming his wire arm while thumb-picking bass strings.

Gretsch introduced a different Bigbsy arm in 1956, and it's nicknamed the 'Duane Eddy arm'. It could be swivelled out of the way and turned back within reach when required. Early examples were aluminium, but this changed to stainless steel in 1958. You could also check out the 'wide vintage' and 'Merle Travis' handles. There's a video on the Bigsby website all about 'specialty' handles and how to fit them. Those who want to use a Bigsby but dislike the long metal handles should check out the Palm-O-Low system.

Bigsby arms come in all shapes and sizes. Here's a 'Chet handle'

## 8 Seating an archtop bridge

In the archtop tradition, almost every Gretsch will have a floating bridge. That means the bridge base is not glued to the top of the guitar and downward pressure from the strings holds the bridge in place. For this type of bridge to transfer string vibrations into the body with the greatest efficiency, the base of the bridge must be matched as closely as possible to the arch of the top.

Take a thin piece of paper and see if you can slip it under the bridge's base. If you can find a gap anywhere around the base, there's room for improvement, but fortunately, it's an easy fix. Cut out a rectangle of 320-grit abrasive paper that's about 5cm wide and about 3cm longer than the bridge base, then fix it to the top using masking tape. The abrasive paper should be in the exact position of the bridge. Place the bridge base on top of the paper and move it back and forth very slightly, following the direction of the strings. After a few movements, flip the bridge base over and you should see areas of sanded and unsanded wood.

Continue a few strokes at a time, checking constantly, until all the wood shows evidence of contact with the abrasive. At that point, you're done. Remove the paper, refit the bridge and string up. The gaps should be gone and you will probably hear an improvement in acoustic tone. If you're happy with your bridge fit, mark the treble and bass sides with a pencil so that the bridge will always be the right way round.

Fitting the bridge base to the body isn't a quick procedure, which is why it's a stage that's skipped on many budget archtops. It's easy to do it yourself, and you should continue to sand until there are abrasion marks all over both feet

## 9 Keeping your Bigsby arm tight

Many of us will have suffered the problem of our Bigsby arms getting loose and eventually falling off – a particularly serious problem if it occurs while playing live. Once you've gone through the process of slackening off the strings, reattaching the arm and stringing back up a few times, you'll probably be ready for a more permanent solution. The problem seems to be that moving the arm gradually loosens the retaining nut holding the arm onto the Bigsby assembly.

Some Gretsch owners swear by Nyloc nuts, but other users have reported mixed results.

You may also find two thin nuts separated by a washer. That's what I had on my '63 Tennessean, and the arm would fall off about once a week. Brinsley Schwarz fixed it by tightening the nut and locking everything together with Super Glue. It's still holding together 20 years later, so thanks, Brins – it was the best £10 I ever spent on that old Gretsch.

This nut was tightened up and locked with Super Glue about 20 years ago. It's been fine ever since

## 10 Tuner swaps

Despite long-standing rumours and occasional encouraging noises emanating from Gretsch, vintage-correct replicas of the Waverly tuners Gretsch used during the 50s and early 60s have yet to materialise. Unfortunately, the vintage Waverlys on many vintage Gretsches will have seen better days – and most Gretsch restorations end up with open-gear Grover Sta-Tites, Gotohs or modern Waverlys for the well heeled.

Brian Setzer is well known for his love of vintage Gretsch guitars, but as a professional performer, he has long taken a pragmatic approach to making his vintage instruments stageworthy. Setzer's preference is for Sperzel tuners, and many Gretsch fans have realised they like the look and feel, too. Unfortunately, fitting die-cast tuners such as Sperzels and Grovers does require the widening of post holes.

Modern Gretsch guitars tend to come with high-quality open-gear or die-cast tuners. There's rarely any good reason to change the former, because if you're encountering tuning instability, the tuners are probably not the issue. Swapping out the die casts for a set of open gears requires conversion bushings. Fortunately, downsizing is an easy job, if you prefer the vintage look and a better overall balance.

In the continued absence of vintage-correct replacements, Grover Sta-Tites are a popular alternative for those who want a functional tuner that retains a vintage vibe

## 11 DeArmond squeal kill

DeArmond Dynasonics are often described as being 'like big-sounding Tele pickups' and, like Tele pickups, they have a tendency to squeal. Played clean at low-to-medium volume levels, Dynasonics can be very well behaved, but high volume and high gain can provoke them into microphonic feedback. Underneath the bobbin, you'll find a complicated arrangement of screws, springs and retainers. Nothing is fixed firmly and soundwaves can certainly get everything moving all too easily. The key to killing the squeal is to stabilise the parts.

Some players have got good results by wrapping strong elastic bands around the metal parts to bind everything together tightly. If you're suffering the squeal, the elastic-band trick is cheap and most certainly worth trying.

Although it has a white bobbin, this DeArmond Dynasonic is just like the black ones Gretsch used. Wrapping the springs and screws with rubber bands can help to reduce squeal

## 12 Fixing the bridge

When there isn't enough downward pressure on the bridge, it's all too easy for it to be knocked out of position. This is a well known issue with archtop guitars in general and is not exclusive to Gretsch guitars. Although heavier-gauge strings might help, you would be compromising playability to fix a mechanical issue.

Fortunately, there are numerous solutions, with varying degrees of invasiveness. Start by ensuring the guitar is set up exactly the way you like it and the intonation is as accurate as possible, then carefully mark the position of the bridge by placing masking tape around the base.

Now you have a few options. First, get some double-sided sticky tape; rather than soft fabric-style carpet tape, go for double-sided Sellotape that's as thin as possible and will have minimal effect on vibration transfer. Apply the tape to the areas of the base that make contact with the body and trim the excess from the edges. Line up the bridge carefully using your masking-tape markers and press the base down onto the body. You may need to renew the tape periodically, but many find this solution lasts for years. Some suggest that violin rosin and white glue work, too, without damaging the finish.

> Although heavier-gauge strings might help, you would be compromising playability to fix a mechanical issue

The alternative is something you may ask your luthier to do for you, as it involves drilling through the bridge into the top of the guitar. Pins or small screws can then be used to fix the bridge, and most choose to countersink them to to make the modification as invisible as possible.

Nearly all modern Gretsches have pinned bridges. The bridges aren't fixed as such and can be lifted off at will. However, this design feature is sufficient to ensure that the bridges stay rock solid when the guitars are being played.

Masking tape was used to mark the correct position for the bridge, then double-sided Sellotape was applied to both 'feet'. The backing has been removed from the treble side and the tape is so thin, it surely has little or no effect on tone transfer. Note how the bass and treble sides are marked in pencil under the arch

## 13 Bridge upgrades

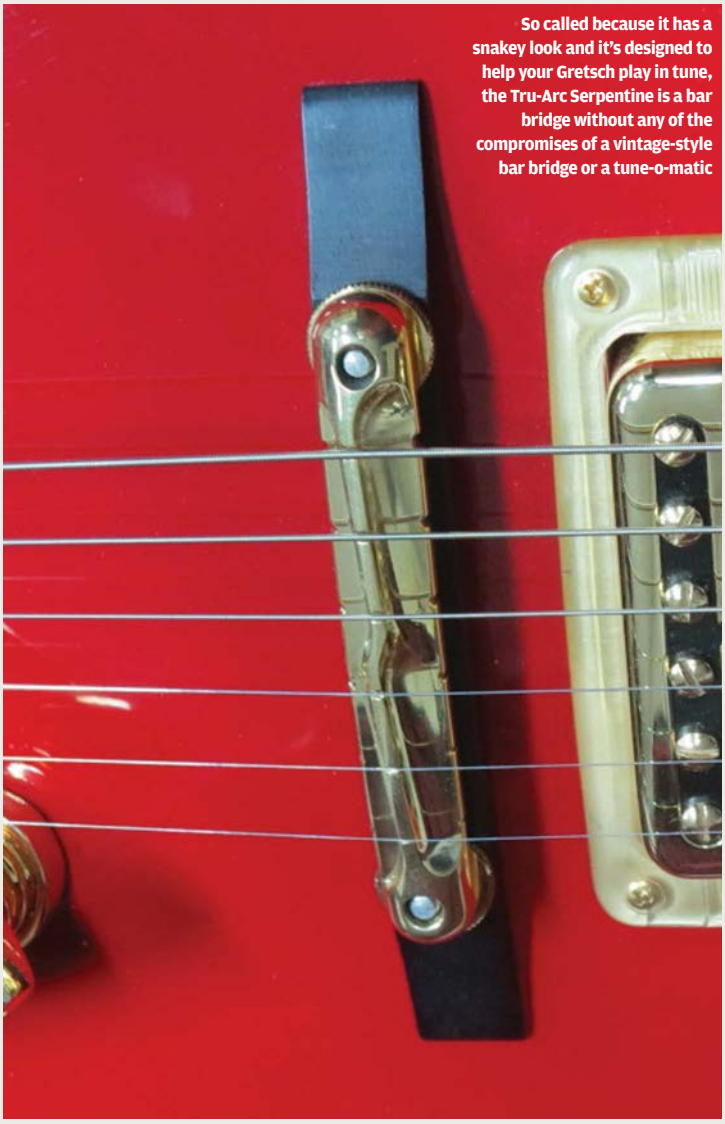
The earliest bar bridges had offset post holes to introduce a slant, much like a regular flat-top acoustic bridge. So the bridge base could be set square to the strings, but the slant helped intonation to some extent. Later versions didn't have the offset holes, so you had to make do by slanting the bridge base instead.

Plenty of vintage Gretsches have been fitted with tune-o-matics, and they're standard on many of today's production models. Although tune-o-matics (or Adjusto-Matics in Gretsch speak) allow intonation adjustment of individual saddles, many players consider the tone inferior to the old bar bridges and they've been reverting to the vintage design.

> Tim Harman designed the Tru-Arc as a replacement bridge for a wide range of modern and vintage Gretsches

Some vintage Gretsch bar bridges fail to conform to the radius of the fingerboard, which can adversely affect the feel of the guitar and limit setup options. Tim Harman recognised this anomaly, and designed the Tru-Arc as a replacement bridge for a wide range of modern and vintage Gretsch guitars. Tru-Arcs are available in copper, brass, stainless steel, aluminium and even glass, in a variety of radii. These are premium products that are even being fitted to some high-end Gretsches and have been adopted by big-name players such as Brian Setzer, Duane Eddy and Paul Pigat.

With regular Tru-Arcs, you have to angle the bridge back on the bass side to get the best intonation. Because of this, some Gretsch players prefer the Compton bar bridge, which has a straight break-off point that's angled backwards on the bass side. The Tru-Arc Serpentine is similar in concept, but the break-off line twists for intonation compensation.



So called because it has a snakey look and it's designed to help your Gretsch play in tune, the Tru-Arc Serpentine is a bar bridge without any of the compromises of a vintage-style bar bridge or a tune-o-matic

Pop down to your hardware shop and buy some rubber grommets to wedge between the strings behind the bridge. This simple mod costs peanuts and will eliminate unwanted noises

## 14 Rubber grommets behind the bridge

You'll probably be fine with a modern Gretsch, but older guitars – especially those that are in need of a neck re-set – may not have enough of a break angle over the bridge to prevent the strings between the bridge and tailpiece or Bigsby from making unwanted noises. These can manifest themselves as sitar-like drones, atonal harmonics or even clear notes that bear no relation to what you're playing, and it can drive you nuts.

Many Gretsch guitars were like this from new, because the neck angle was shallow to begin with. This is especially true of vintage Anniversary models that have been retrofitted with Bigsbys. Fortunately, though, this is a simple mod that can help, and is a lot cheaper than a complete neck re-set.

Paul Pigat told us about the B-Blender. It allows you to perform pedal-steel licks on a Bigsby-equipped guitar without losing the use of the Bigsby

**15 B-Blender**

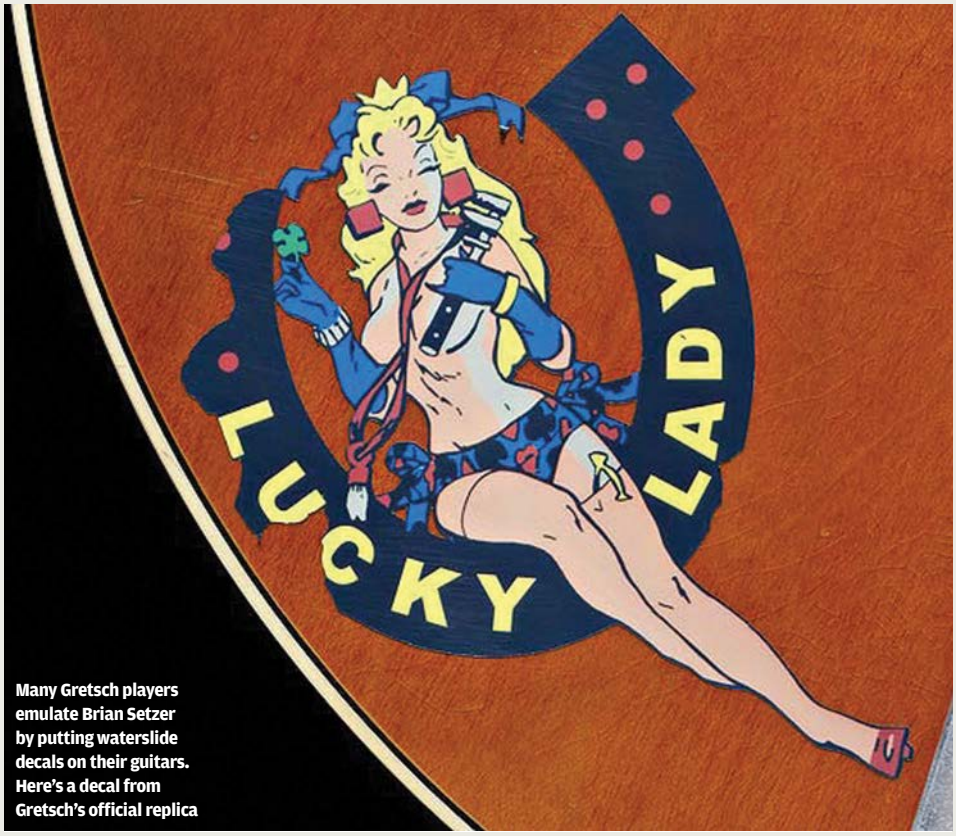
If you play a Gretsch guitar, there's a good chance that you'll be into country music, too. Telecaster players are well catered for when it comes to mechanical string-bending devices that can create pedal-steel effects, but until recently, Gretsch players were restricted to, at best, bending strings behind the bridge using their fingers.

Paul Pigat tipped us off about the B-Blender (www.b-blender.com). It attaches to Bigsby-equipped guitars and enables mechanical B-string bending by pulling the replacement Bigsby arm towards the string – the Bigsby itself continues to operate normally. The B-Blender can be installed and uninstalled by the owner, and no extra holes need to be made in the guitar. Better still, the unit can also be adapted and used as a G-Bender.

**16 Decals and dice**

Cutomised Strats and Les Pauls generally end up looking a bit naff, but Gretsch guitars seem to take better to the personalised touch. Nothing says rockabilly quite like a retro-themed waterslide decal, so check out Pin Ups Plus (www.pinupsplus.com) or Greasy Groove (www.greasygroove.com). The advantage waterslide decals have over stickers is they can be removed fairly easily and they're less likely to gum up your guitar's finish; but, as with stickers, you may end up with a 'shadow' on the finish if they're left on for a few years.

While you're at it, check out the selection of fancy knobs, pickguards and truss-rod covers. You could get dice knobs, or maybe a chrome or black pearl skull. Maybe you've always wanted a G-brand Gretsch, but you feel nervous about the idea of taking a white-hot iron to your guitar? Try using a Gretsch Gear (www.gretschstore.com) sticker instead. If you're a Stray Cats fan, what about making your own replica of Mr Setzer's first guitar? The decals do come up on eBay from time to time.




Many Gretsch players emulate Brian Setzer by putting waterslide decals on their guitars. Here's a decal from Gretsch's official replica

## 17 Shimming the pickups

Anyone who has ever experimented with adjusting the pickup height on a Les Paul, Strat or some such will be aware that you can achieve massive improvements in bass and treble balance, as well as overall tone, if you get the distances between the polepieces and the strings just right.

Unfortunately, vintage-spec Gretsch pickups had no provision for height adjustment and many players have simply put up with things rather than exploring any other options.

Gretsch pickup guru TV Jones has been banging on about this for years and there's a page on his website dedicated to pickup adjustments. His recommended starting point is a 3/16" gap between the polepieces and the two E strings.

Since Filter'Trons and HiLo'Trons are screwed directly onto the body, you have to put springy foam spacers under the pickups to push upwards. Some people use mouse mat material. DeArmond-style pickups require specially cut spacers, but they're easy to find online.

> Set your polepieces as low as possible, adjust the pickup height then fine-tune the polepieces

Set your polepieces as low as possible, adjust the overall pickup height, then fine-tune the polepieces if you feel the need. If you find your bridge Dynasonic is too bright, spin it around 180 degrees to put the polepieces further from the bridge before you set the height.

Foam rubber is the best stuff for shimming up Filter'Tron and HiLo'Tron pickups. These foam shims have been on the guitar for a while, but they're still doing the job

## 18 Metal jackplate upgrade

If your jack socket is mounted directly onto the side of the guitar, a strong tug or a drop on the jack plug can cause the wood to crack or snap, and nobody wants that to happen to their beloved instrument. Many owners of Electromatic hollowbodies fit a metal jackplate over the existing hole.

> A strong tug or a drop on the jack plug can cause the wood to crack or snap

It can be a bit fiddly, because you may need to replace the jack socket itself if the thread shaft is too short. A Switchcraft jack from Allparts UK with a 3/8" shaft should be fine, or alternatively, you could widen the hole in the body.

Fitting a metal jack plate to your guitar will strengthen a potentially vulnerable area. You need one that's curved, and there are various options to match your hardware or finish

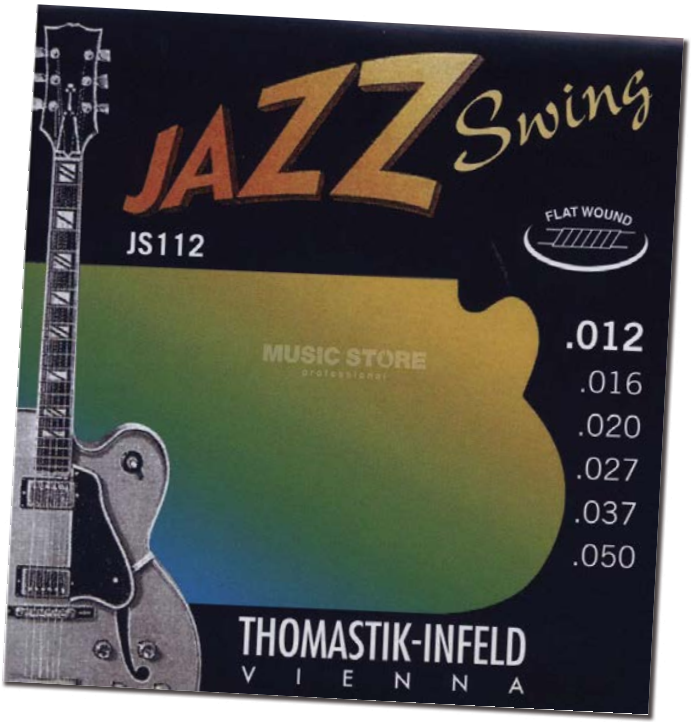
## 19 String improvements

Gretsch pickups are pretty sensitive, and it's worth experimenting with different types of strings to discover what works for you. It would be hard to improve on Malcolm Young's rhythm tone for rock, and he's known to favour Gibson pure-nickel roundwound strings.

Young's are 12-gauge with a wound G, so they would be too heavy for most lead work, but if you can get by with 11s rather than 10s, it will really suit your Gretsch. Pure-nickel strings, such as Ernie Ball Rock 'N' Rolls are worth trying for long-lasting brightness if you are able to get hold of them.

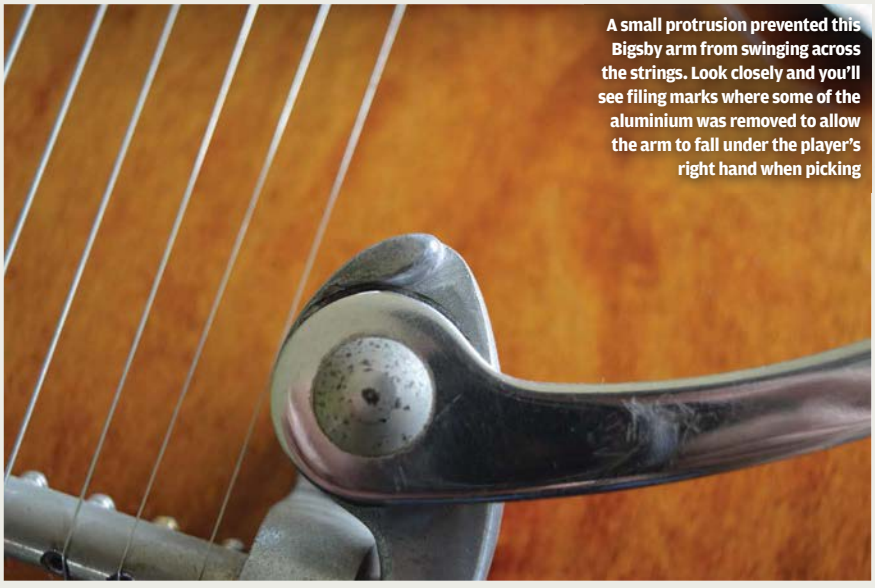
If you're after Cliff Gallup and Scotty Moore-style 50s tone, you might want to think about trying flatwounds. Thomastik Jazz Swings are popular for their strong fundamental tone with controlled harmonic overtones, but some players prefer a plain G for bending.

Some enjoy strings that are halfway between flat and roundwound. GHS Brite Flats are micro-ground to have some of the feel and tone of flatwound strings with, as the name suggests, extra brightness.




**Picking the right strings can be crucial with Gretsch guitars. If you're chasing 50s tones, try a set of flatwounds. Thomastik Jazz Swings get a lot of love**

**If your arm feels too low, you can place a washer or a coin under the spring to raise it up. A 5p piece or one-cent coin will work just fine**



**A small protrusion prevented this Bigsby arm from swinging across the strings. Look closely and you'll see filing marks where some of the aluminium was removed to allow the arm to fall under the player's right hand when picking**

## 20 Bigsby modifications

Besides changing the arm as discussed earlier, there are a few other Bigsby upgrades and modifications to consider. The Bigsby on the Gretsch pictured here had a moulding that prevented the arm from coming past the high E, so I couldn't operate the Bigsby while I was picking the strings. A couple of minutes with a hacksaw and a file removed the obstruction.

Some guitar owners find it tough to string Bigsbys, because it's hard to get the ball end of the strings to stay hooked onto the pins. It's possible to unscrew the pins, then drill the holes all the way through the bar. The strings can then go through and over the bar, much like top wrapping a Les Paul tailpiece.

If the arm is too close to the body, try putting a metal washer under the spring to raise the angle. If the bar is too high, on the other hand, you may find there's a washer already in there that can be removed – or you can buy a shorter spring. Allparts UK stocks 22mm and 25mm springs. If you would prefer a softer and smoother feel, check out Reverend Guitars' Soft Touch Spring.

Some guitar owners find it tough to string Bigsbys, because it's hard to get the ball end of the strings to stay hooked onto the pins

GRETSCH

# Tone Control

Fancy a taste of the fabled Gretsch tone? **DAVE HUNTER** explains what you need to know about every ingredient in its unique sonic recipe

If Gibson and Fender have dominated the ranks of classic tones, that's not for want of trying on Gretsch's part. 'That great Gretsch sound', as the company's early ads proclaimed, arguably runs a distinguished third to the 'Big Two', and does so by presenting a compelling alternative – one that has logged more than its fair share of legendary recordings and performances over the past 60 years. Even so, the wiles and ways of the Stratocaster and the Les Paul, the Telecaster and the ES-335 – and, of course, all their modern descendants and derivatives – tend to form the foundation of most players' knowledge base when it comes to tone-shaping. If you're eager to dig into what a Gretsch can do for you, however, you need to greatly reconsider your starting points.

To that end, let's explore how and why these tone generators are different from the other classic designs, and what might be done to maximise their potential in different musical settings...

Gretsch punched above its weight in the 50s and, for a time at least, played a bigger part than any guitar maker in establishing the sound of rock 'n' roll. For that reason, Gretsch remains the guitar of choice for purists chasing rockabilly tones today. But Gretsches have delivered a diverse range of noteworthy sounds over the years, and are capable of doing something new for your sound even today – if, that is, you put a little thought into what makes these guitars tick, and how they might best interact with the rest of your rig to attain your desired sonic ends.

*The way these guitars were built plays an enormous part in how they function as tone generators*

## Build factors

In addition to the pickups' sizeable effect on Gretsch guitars' sounds (more on that topic below), the way these guitars were built plays an enormous part in how they function as tone generators. Even though classic Gretsch models are split between two main types (the hollowbody 6120 on one hand and the so-called 'solidbody' Duo Jet on the other, plus several descendants of the two), the latter is still a heavily chambered guitar, so both include a lot of air in their resonant characteristics. That, and both are built somewhat like old-school archtop-electric jazzboxes, albeit ones made with laminated tops, in that they have floating two-piece bridges with wood bases, and a fairly formidable string height off the body. The semi-hollow Duo Jet and its ilk will have a little more thump and ring to them than the hollow 6120 and its brethren, but they aren't nearly as different as, for example, the Les Paul and ES-175 that they otherwise approximately resemble. What they do have in common with their Gibson rivals, however, is that the 6120, a White Falcon, or an Anniversary will howl with acoustic-vibration-induced feedback far more readily than will the Duo Jet, particularly when put to use in a high-gain rock context.

Coupled with either a Bigsby or a trapeze tailpiece, these factors all add up to a relative dearth of sustain when compared to a more solidly anchored Tele, Strat, or Les Paul, along with less string tension at the bridge and nut, enhancing a light, ringing 'jangle' in these guitars' core tones. If it >

sounds as though I'm implying that all of this is bad, though, hang fire; such factors are merely part of the 'different' that you need to be aware of when plugging in a Gretsch for the first time, and all play a part in what makes them so interesting.

## Pickup choices

The way to best handle a Gretsch through your own rig of choice depends on which of the two main types of pickups that the maker used in its formative years is loaded into your particular guitar, so I'll approach these tone tips from those two perspectives. Gretsch did use other pickups, too, and many of those, along with these two types, can be explored in our All About... Gretsch Pickups feature on p124. For the most part, however, the others all pale into insignificance in comparison to the DeArmond-made Dynasonics and Gretsch-made Filter'Trons, which populate the vast majority of noteworthy Gretsch models.

## Not what they may seem

When considering how your amp and pedals will react to a Gretsch guitar, you should also be aware that, to a certain extent at least, the two main different types of pickups this maker has used tend to play against type, as regards our general perception of what 'a single coil' and 'a humbucker' should do.

In brief: humbucking Gretsch Filter'Trons (or the quality replacements from TV Jones, McNelly, The Creamery and the like) are, aside from being hum-cancelling, very low-output pickups that tend to drive an amp minimally, more in the way that vintage-spec single-coil pickups do. Single-coil DeArmond Dynasonic (aka Model 200) pickups have higher outputs, and they hit an amp's front end somewhat harder as a result, although still with a sharp, bright, alnico-pole response. As such, both really perform more like different shades of single-coil pickups, but not quite like the single coils on any other popular make of guitar. Think of it like this: if a Fender Stratocaster, with its thin single-coil pickups, is a knife, the Gretsch is a rusty knife. It cuts, but does so with a more textured profile that lends plenty of character to the results, whether clean or dirty.

*If a Fender Stratocaster, with its thin single-coil pickups, is a knife, the Gretsch is a rusty knife*

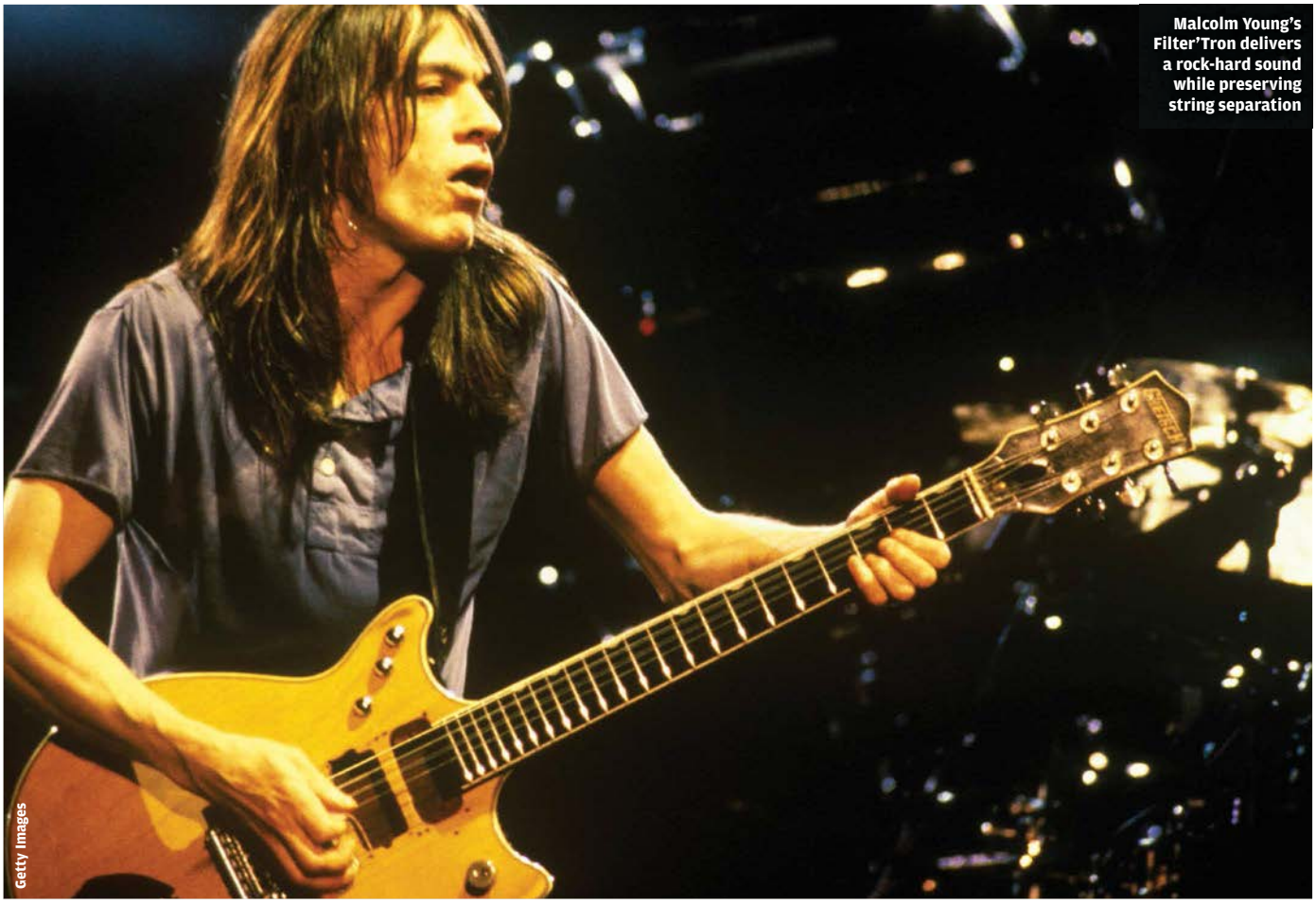
**This G6137TCB combines a centre-block and dual High Sensitive Filter'Trons for a more modern take on Gretsch tone**

## Twang and girth

As such, Gretsch guitars with Filter'Trons shouldn't be approached like guitars with Gibson-style, full-size humbuckers – 'Plug into this Marshall and wail!' – but more as you'd approach a well-rounded, vintage-spec single coil such as a Telecaster bridge pickup. The lower output lets you retain a clean, clear voice, but one that's still a little richer and grittier than a true single coil, thanks to its broader magnetic window. When you drive the amp hard, either by cranking up the amp itself, or by using a good dirt pedal, you therefore retain more clarity and string definition, with a silvery bite that cuts through the mix beautifully.

To some extent, that classic jangle heard in Gretsch-fuelled clean tones translates to a distinct, slightly metallic, yet succulent snarl amid your distortion of choice, and really helps the part stand out as a result. This is a major component of what enables Gretsch-fuelled rock tones to remain clear and sharp with good string definition, while also having a lot of balls to them. Think Billy Duffy with The Cult or Malcolm Young's rhythm parts with AC/DC: they rock hard, but they never descend into the smooth blur and muddy lows that a full-size, higher-output humbucker often delivers.

Kept clean, Filter'Tron-loaded Gretsch guitars have an appealing marriage of twang and girth, which translates to everything from great second-generation rockabilly to indie jangle, and plenty in between. Through a big, bold amp – whether a Marshall JTM45 or Plexi Super Lead, or a Fender Twin Reverb – they will resist dishing out the dirt up to high volume levels. This can make them excellent jazz guitars, of course, and major twang monsters on neck and bridge pickups respectively: but great for shimmering ballad tones, too, and sweet contenders behind modulation effects. But I have always really dug them plugged into mid-sized, vintage-style amps, and nominal 'Class A' amps in particular. Through a



Malcolm Young's Filter'Tron delivers a rock-hard sound while preserving string separation

Getty Images

semi-cranked tweed or a Vox AC15 or AC30, Gretsch guitars with these narrow, low-output humbuckers exhibit an appealing rounding-off of the upper frequencies, a chewy yet not over-pronounced midrange, and a juicy, rich harmonic overtone content that yields a truly delectable playing experience.

Note, too, that while many players disdain the 'mud switch' – the three-way toggle that most Filter'Tron-carrying Gretsch guitars display in lieu of tone pots – these can be useful for dialling in some overdriven tones, in particular. Through some higher-gain pedals or amp channels, the middle 'tone bypass' position can be too brittle or sharp, whereas the lower 'slight mud' position rounds off the highs just right, giving something close to a faux-PAF response. And, although totally abandoned by most players, the upper 'much mud' position can sometimes do a great 'woman' tone into a good overdrive, and doubles as a surprisingly effective octave-pedal sound through a fuzz box when you go for pinched harmonics playing the strings up close to the end of the fretboard.

## Twangin' with Dynasonics

Dynasonics sound entirely different, and yet, funnily enough, still exude a sound that is entirely 'Gretsch' (they came first, but I'm discussing them second here because they tend to be the lesser-seen of the two classic Gretsch pickups, although still very popular). These quirky single coils can sound punchy and hard through the wrong amp or setting: 'brittle' or 'cold' through, for example, a high-powered clean amp that shows no mercy in the boldness and clarity stakes. This can translate to a big, cutting clean tone if you want mammoth twang with a fast response and a lot of attack.

*While many players disdain the 'mud switch', this can be useful for dialling in overdriven tones*

For most players, though, even those who are chasing what we might call 'vintage clean', Dynasonic-loaded Gretsch guitars benefit from either a little gentle break-up or compression at the front end of your amp. This might mean driving a small- to medium-sized tube amp so it's just at the edge of crunch when you hit a powerchord hard, resulting in a chewy, tactile attack that takes the 'ice pick' effect out of single-note lead runs. Or it might mean using a good overdrive pedal set to lower gain to do the same, or a medium setting on a compressor pedal to take some of the sting and bark out of the front of the note into a loud, clean amp.

All that being said, Dynasonics do push an amp a little harder than Filter'Trons, so Gretsches loaded with these pickups deliver a sound and feel somewhat like that of a P-90, but with more clarity and more high-end sharpness, thanks to the alnico-rod polepieces. In any case, consider dialling down any treble and presence controls on the amp, and switch off any bright switch options. Start mellow, and work your way up to appropriate treble levels from there.

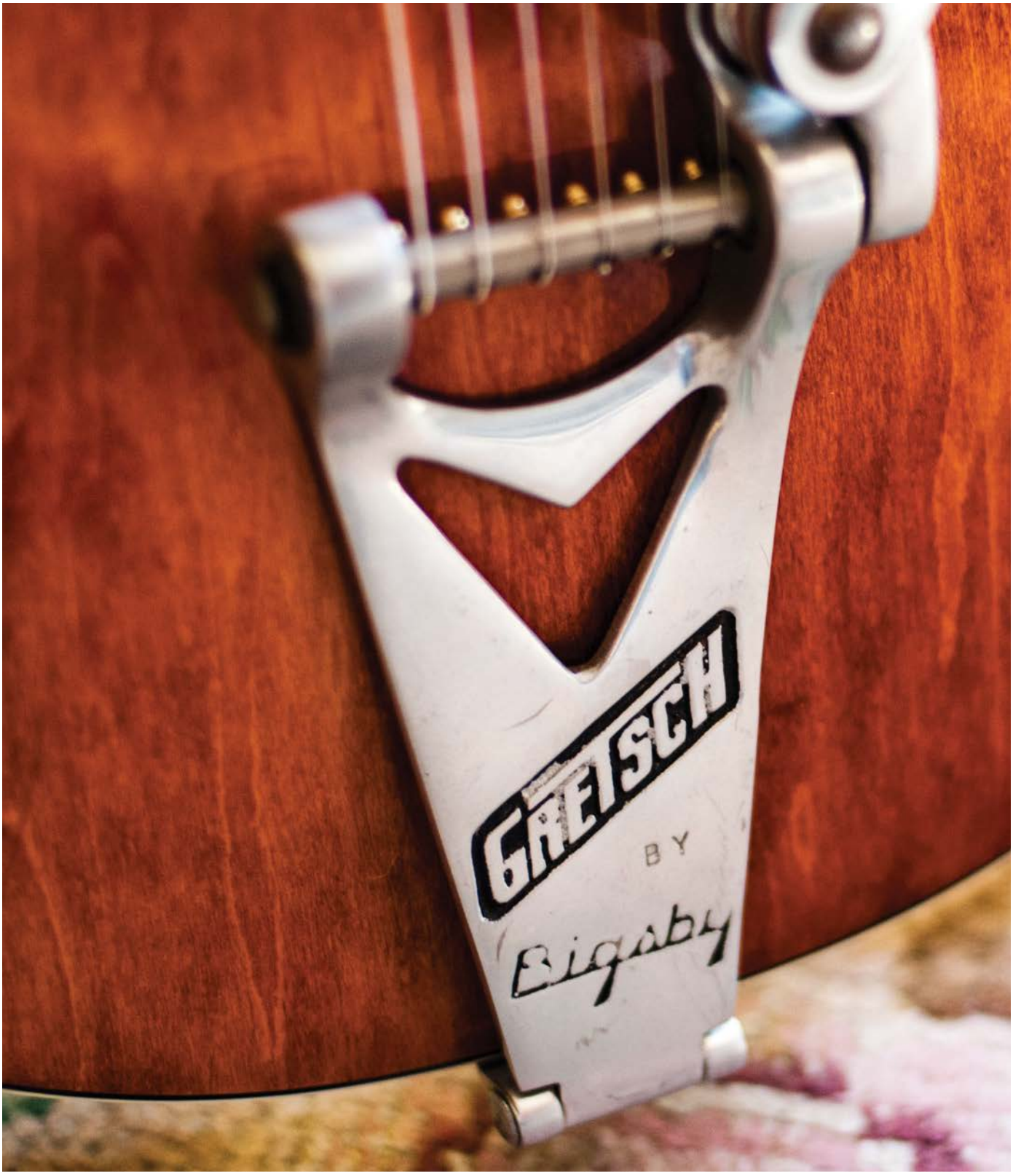
When dialled in right, Dynasonic-loaded guitars make for great classic rock, alt-country, old-school punk, and indie tones. They remain crisp and clear through moderate breakup, twang hard even when set somewhat dirty, and exhibit a sweetly chewy yet firm touch sensitivity when starting to push an amp just a little.

Take all of the above into account, and it's clear you can do just about anything short of death metal on one of the traditionally equipped Gretsch guitars, and do it with style and an original voice, too. And these are just some starting points: if you're new to the Gretsch camp, keep these basic characteristics and tendencies in mind, and apply 'that great Gretsch sound' to your own rig – adjusted accordingly – to see what you come up with.

FACTFILE

# All about... Bigsby

Although it may seem the most archaic of guitar accessories, we've been using Paul Bigsby's vibrato for 60 years because it looks drop-dead cool – and it works. **HUW PRICE** salutes the guitar world's original mover and shaker



The Bigsby name remains so current it's hard to believe the man behind the brand was born in the 19th century. Basically, Paul Adelburt Bigsby was the sort of old-fashioned guy who could disappear into his garage and make anything you wanted. Before getting into guitars, Bigsby designed and made parts for motorbikes; so he had a solid background in casting and machining metal.

During the 1930s, Rickenbacker made a cast-aluminium steel guitar that became known as the 'frying pan'. Bigsby probably figured he could do something similar, or better – and he did so. Bigsby made lap- and pedal-steel instruments combining figured maple with cast and tooled aluminium parts. Today, among collectors, Bigsby steels fetch serious money, and even as a non-smoker, my favourite feature has to be the built-in ashtray.

## The guitars

Although it would be stretching things to say it inspired the Telecaster's 'ashtray' bridge, there can be little doubt that Bigsby's six-string solid-body designs had a strong influence on his friend and neighbour, Leo Fender. Like his first steel guitar, Bigsby's initial six-string was completed in 1947, based on something Merle Travis had sketched out on the program sheet from a Pasadena radio station.

Bigsby guitars are incredibly rare and collectible because very few were ever made. Each one was essentially custom built, with a price tag of $600 and a two-year waiting list. Early 50s Telecasters cost around $200 and there wasn't a waiting list. According to Deke Dickerson's estimate, the six-string electric guitars Bigsby made number in the tens rather than tens of thousands. Fender was into low-cost mass production, but Bigsby was boutique. He also made five-string guitars, basses, double-necks and mandolin-style instruments. Name players who used them include Merle Travis, Grady Martin, Lefty Frizzell and Billy Byrd. If you check out recordings made with Bigsby guitars, you'll recognise a full, clear, woody tone that really has its own sound.

*When the word Bigsby is used today, it's almost always assumed to mean a style of vibrato rather than a guitar*

## The pickups

Much of the Bigsby sound can be attributed to the pickups, which were quite innovative with a cast-aluminium housing that helped shield the wide, flat single coils from hum. Plenty of pro players bought Bigsby's pickups to put on their own guitars, including Chet Atkins and Les Paul – who used an Epiphone with a Bigsby pickup to record *How High The Moon*. Of course, Bigsby made everything himself and this desire to handle every aspect personally meant that he would struggle to produce more than one instrument per month. Keeping up with orders eventually became even more difficult, due to the runaway success of the product that keeps his name alive today – the Bigsby vibrato. So much so that when the word Bigsby is used, it's almost always assumed to mean a style of vibrato rather than a guitar.

## The Bigsby vibrato

Bigsby was unequivocal about his device being a vibrato. Leo Fender's choice of 'synchronized tremolo' for the name of his Strat bridge design was probably an attempt to differentiate the two products. However, there can be little doubt that both men clearly understood the difference between vibrato and tremolo.

Either way, Bigsby's design probably pre-dates Fender's by several years, and came about as a result of an early meeting with that man Travis. He had brought his Gibson L-10 guitar to Bigsby because its Kauffman 'Vibrola' wouldn't stay in tune. At first, Bigsby agreed to fix the Vibrola but it wasn't a success. Eventually, with Travis' encouragement, he set about >

**While the name Bigsby is now associated most closely with vibrato arms, Bigsby guitars are much-sought-after. This Paul Bigbsy Billy Byrd model was originally made for Jimmy Bryant, but was sold instead to Nashville-born guitarist Byrd**

designing his own vibrato device. There may be numerous Bigsby vibratos available these days, but the operating principle remains identical to that earliest design. The Bigsby mounts on top of a guitar, with the strings wrapped around a roller bar. The ball ends of the strings are slipped over pins in the bar that hold them in place. The roller bar passes through the body of the unit and attaches to a bracket and arm. Pressing the arm downwards causes the bar to twist in the direction of the nut. Beneath the bracket is a coiled spring, which provides the restorative force needed to return the bar to its original position.

Early units had rubber stoppers rather than springs, and the arms were fixed. Later, Bigsby collaborated with Ted McCarty at Gibson, who devised the swinging arm. It's a simple mechanism that provides vibrato with stable tuning, as long as the guitar is set up well and the player understands the Bigsby's limitations. A semitone is a fairly big deviation for a Bigsby, so Hendrix acrobatics and Floyd Rose-style dive bombs are well outside its abilities. To hear some 'extreme' Bigsby use, such as it is, try listening to Lonnie Mack and Neil Young.

*Paul Bigsby's instruments are revered, his pickups prized and his vibrato a roaring success*

## Bigsby types

Merle Travis' Gibson L-10 was a big archtop, so the first Bigsby was designed to fit on guitars of that type. The shape of the top ensured that the string break-off point on the roller bar was lower than the bridge, so there would be a sufficiently high break angle. There was also plenty of space behind the bridge for the unit itself. The original-style Bigsby was called the B6.

This was fine for a while, but by 1952, Fender had the Telecaster and Gibson had the Les Paul – and the original Bigsby wouldn't fit on either of them. As a result, Bigsby started coming up with variations on his original design. The problem to address with the Tele was that its flat top meant there was no break angle. Bigsby devised a massive and complex casting that fundamentally altered the Telecaster geometry and completely replaced the bridge and saddles. A shim was necessary to create a back angle for the neck, and this unit was called the B16.

Later, Bigsby devised the B5 'horseshoe' with an added front bar to sharpen the break angle without having to shim the neck. This could be used on flat-top electrics such as Rickenbackers, Les Paul Juniors and SGs. With string notches cut into the bridge, a B5 can be used with Telecasters, too, and several companies sell pre-notched Tele bridges. Bigsby also sells a B5 Fender kit that includes a new bridge assembly and separate pickup plate. To fit a B5, you have to drill four screw holes in the top of the guitar.

For small archtops such as the Les Paul and Gretsch Duo Jet, other solutions were needed. The jazzbox-style neck attachment of the Duo Jet made it an easy fix, and all that was needed was a shortened version that was called the B3.

The low-set Les Paul and ES series necks require the front roller bar to sharpen the bridge break angle, and the correct fitting is the Bigsby B7. Like the B5 unit, it also has to be screwed to the top.

Many a vintage guitar has ended up with tell-tale screw holes that indicate a Bigsby was fitted at some time. One of the most famous examples is Joe Bonamassa's 'Snakebite' Les Paul.

As electric-guitar pioneers go, Paul Bigsby is up there with Leo Fender. His instruments are revered, his pickups prized and his vibrato a roaring success. Sadly, Bigsby's health began to fail and he sold his company to former Gibson exec Ted McCarty in 1966, two years before he died. Gretsch has owned the Bigsby brand since 1999.

# BUYER'S GUIDE

It would be all too easy to list a bunch of Bigsby vibratos, but that wouldn't do the man's legacy justice and prospective buyers can get that information from the Bigsby website. Instead, let's check out a range of Bigsby-inspired products...

### RC ALLEN BIGSBY REPLICA GUITAR £2,138

With originals fetching up to $80,000, the most realistic option is probably a replica. The late RC Allen was a guitar maker in Southern California who also made guitars for Merle Travis. His work is highly respected, and at the time of writing there was one for sale on Reverb.com. Gretsch made a small number of Bigsby replicas too.

### TK SMITH C.A.R POLE PIECE $320

This is a hand-built replica of a Paul Bigsby pickup, complete with a cast-aluminium housing. It looks the part, and it sounds the part as well. Some players have been putting these in custom-build T-types. You can custom-order a Bigsby-style guitar from TK Smith, too.

### VIBRAMATE V7 STANDARD KIT £58

These days, you can fit a Bigsby to pretty much any guitar without drilling extra holes if you buy a Vibramate system. This is the kit you need to mount a B7 Bigsby on a Les Paul. It cleverly utilises the unused tailpiece stud holes. The Bigsby B7 costs extra.

### TOWNER HINGE PLATE ADAPTOR £7

Vibramate solved the top-holes problem and the Towner hinge plate adaptor enables you to use your strap-button screw to secure the hinge so there's no need to drill three or four holes in the side. It also makes a Down Tension Bar (£21) that bolts onto the top in place of the stop tailpiece, so you can install a regular Bigsby without the integral tension bar.

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FACTFILE

# All about... Gretsch pickups

From after-market DeArmonds in the 1930s through to modern-day Filter'Trons, HiLo'Trons and TV Jones models, **HUW PRICE** charts the ever-evolving story of Gretsch pickups...

As one of America's oldest guitar manufacturers, Gretsch was there at the very beginning of the electric-guitar era. During the jazz age, the acoustic archtop reigned supreme – and back then, guitar manufacturers made guitars, while pickup manufacturers made pickups.

Players who wanted a guitar with a pickup had to order one factory-fitted to a new guitar, or attach a 'floating' pickup. Most archtop manufacturers and builders, including Gretsch, would buy pickups from specialist manufacturers to fulfil customer orders. Many a Gretsch archtop ended up with a DeArmond Rhythm Chief, and the Gretsch Django Reinhardt was pictured with during his time in New York in 1946 was probably fitted with a Leutone pickup – some of which were Gretsch-branded.

The Gibson company stood alone. Despite subsequent ridicule for its initial rejection of Les Paul's 'log' concept, at least Gibson had the foresight to begin manufacturing pickups in-house during the 1930s, and has continued to do so ever since.

It wasn't until 1957 that Gretsch started manufacturing its own pickups; so many of the iconic Gretsch electric-guitar tones were actually derived from pickups that Gretsch bought in. In this article, we'll be taking a look at the pickups fitted to Gretsch guitars from the beginning to the present day.

## DeArmond Dynasonic

During the 1930s, Gretsch marketed a line of archtops with built-in pickups and controls. These were the first-generation Electromatics, and they were actually manufactured by Kay in Chicago.

Maybe Gretsch was just testing the water, because in 1949, a new Gretsch-manufactured Electromatic was introduced. The model was the 6185 and it had a single DeArmond pickup.

The association between Gretsch guitars and DeArmond stretched back to the 1930s. Harry DeArmond invented some of the first after-market guitar pickups (or 'mikes' as they were called) and teamed up with Rowe Industries in Toledo, Ohio to manufacture them. DeArmond pickups featured in 1940s Gretsch catalogues and the two companies even collaborated to develop a playing technique for the 'electric Spanish guitar' called the Gretsch-DeArmond Method.

The really big deal about the 6185 Electromatic was the way in which the pickup was installed directly onto the top, along with the controls. This was made possible because DeArmond had just designed its first pickup for fixed installation. The Dynasonic, or 'Fidelatone' as it was sometimes called, would remain standard issue on all Gretsch electric guitars until 1958.

From the outside, it's a clean, compact and advanced design with individually adjustable magnetic polepieces. Take a look beneath and you'll see protruding screws, slug holders and springs. Most people are surprised to learn that they have a DC resistance around 14k, but they're not over-wound. Dynasonics were made with 44 AWG plain enamel wire, which is far thinner than the 42 AWG wire that's standard on most modern pickups and even the 43 AWG used on the earliest Fender single coils.

Although you could adjust polepiece height, the pickup itself was fixed to the guitar top by four screws. To balance out the pickups on two-pickup guitars, Gretsch had to get the bridge pickups closer to the strings. It achieved this by shimming up the bridge pickup using celluloid spacers.

The Dynasonic is clear, sensitive, powerful, twangy and dynamic. Famously used by Duane Eddy and Cliff Gallup, it's also the preferred pickup of punk legend Billy Zoom. It was a popular choice for jazz back in the day, and modern jazz virtuoso Bill Frisell has a pair in one of his favourite Telecasters. For many, the DeArmond Dynasonic produces the definitive tone for Gretsch guitars, and it's undoubtedly one of the finest pickups ever designed.

*For many, the DeArmond Dynasonic produces the definitive tone for Gretsch guitars*

A DeArmond Dynasonic on a 1955 Gretsch Jet Firebird

## Filter'Tron

Chet Atkins was, in the 1950s, Gretsch's most famous endorser – despite the fact he never really liked the DeArmond Dynasonic. Chet was Gretsch's answer to Les Paul, so it's ironic that Les' love of the Dynasonic obliged Gibson to design the staple P-90 just to keep him happy.

Chet objected to the Dynasonic's single-coil hum, but more importantly, he wanted a better-balanced tone for his thumb-and-fingerpicking playing style. Chet also felt the strong Dynasonic magnets reduced sustain by exerting too much pull on the strings.

Ray Butts was known as an electronics wizard around the Nashville music scene. Chet had met him when he bought one of Butts' EchoSonic amplifiers with a built-in tape echo, and they worked together on amps and studio equipment. Unbeknown to Gretsch, Chet decided to ask Butts if he could design a pickup that wouldn't hum.

Butts was aware of the transformer-based hum-cancelling circuits that the American tape-machine manufacturer Ampex used for recording heads and realised the same principle could be applied to pickup design.

He built a prototype with white bobbins and Chet installed them in a sealed-top black 6120 prototype that he used as a test-bed guitar. Photographs taken at the Grand Ole Opry in September 1956 show Chet playing the black 6120 with Butts' prototype pickups. Suitably impressed, Chet duly suggested presenting the idea to Gretsch.

The timing was perfect. Gretsch had decided to explore other options, because DeArmond was supplying pickups to competitors such as Guild and Epiphone as well as 'down-market' manufacturers such as Harmony. Gretsch was concerned this would reflect poorly on the company. Rather than buying the pickups directly >

from Butts, Gretsch opted to manufacture them in-house and agreed to pay Butts a royalty. Butts then worked closely with Jimmie Webster at Gretsch to create a production version of the pickup, which Gretsch christened the Filter'Tron Electronic Guitar Head.

So did Ray Butts or Gibson's Seth Lover invent the humbucking pickup? The most plausible answer is they both did, and at more or less the same time. Guitarists everywhere would have been complaining about hum, so the race was surely on. Both men adapted hum-cancelling principles already proven in other audio equipment to address the same issue.

The Filter'Tron was announced in 1957 at the summer NAMM show in Chicago – just as Gibson was exhibiting the first of its PAF-loaded Les Pauls. It's reported there was some dispute between the two companies regarding the rights to the design, but Gibson's Ted McCarthy and Fred Gretsch eventually reached a gentleman's agreement.

Both companies applied for patents and both companies made humbucking pickups marked 'Patent Applied For', but the very earliest Filter'Trons had no lettering on the covers and they're associated with late-57 and '58 manufacture. In his *Manual Of Gretsch Guitars*, Ed Ball refers to them as 'pre-PAFs'. The 1959 Filter'Tron covers were stamped 'Pat. Applied For' and by the end of 1960 the covers were stamped 'U.S. Pat 2892371'.

Although some Gretsch fans attach kudos to PAF Filter'Trons, it's most likely a carryover from Gibson lore. Unlike Gibson, Gretsch continued to produce pickups unchanged, and the patent-numbered Filter'Trons of the late-60s were the same as the PAF and pre-PAF Filter'Trons. Any variations were due to supply issues and manufacturing inconsistencies rather than redesign. The only exception was a brief period during the mid-1960s, when Gretsch ran out of Filter'Tron covers and had to use open-top HiLo covers instead.

Vintage Filter'Trons generally have a DC resistance between 4k and 5k; the coils were machine wound with 42 AWG plain enamel wire onto plastic bobbins 2 7/16 inches in length and Gretsch didn't wax-pot them. The design called for ¼-inch alnico bar magnets that were double the thickness of those used in Gibson's P-90s and PAFs. Grades of alnico varied depending on what was available, but many attribute the Filter'Tron's growly twang to the combination of a strong magnet with low-wind coils.

Django Reinhardt playing a Gretsch fitted with a Leutone pickup (below)

*Filter'Trons are smoother and more compressed than Dynasonics, with extra growl but less twang*

Alnico became expensive, so, having taken over Gretsch, Baldwin installed cheaper ceramic magnets from 1970 onwards. Baldwin also reverted to the open-top HiLo'Tron casing and concealed the polepieces under a black plastic cover. These are called 'blacktops'.

When Gretsch production resumed in the 1990s, Filter'Trons came with 43 AWG wire and ceramic magnets. These examples are not very highly regarded, and Gretsch started changing the specs back to 42 AWG wire and alnico 5 magnets in 2002, around the time that it hooked up with Fender.

You can identify ceramic Filter'Trons from this era by the rounded heads of the polepiece screws. The alnico versions had the vintage-style screws with a squared-off 'shoulder'. The latest version is the ceramic Fideli'Tron that first appeared on 2013 La Cabronita Telecasters.

Vintage-style Filter'Trons are smoother and more compressed than Dynasonics, with extra growl but less twang. Brian Setzer has been demonstrating their versatility for decades, and you've probably heard them on countless Who and AC/DC recordings.

They're equally well suited to clean country and jazz styles, hard rock and even high gain. Jan Akkerman had sussed that out by the early 1970s and put one in his Les Paul. In recent times, the rest of the world has been catching on to this amazing pickup.

A Gretsch-branded Leutone 'floating' single-coil pickup

## HiLo'Tron

There was a short period between late-'59 and mid-'60 when DeArmond stocks had run out and Gretsch fitted a rare pickup known as the Clipper Transitional. It was a single coil that came with both black and white covers, that lasted until Gretsch introduced the HiLo'Tron in mid-1960.

The HiLo was intended for entry-level and mid-priced models such as the Clipper, Anniversary and Tennessean. Lower-profile than the Filter'Tron, the HiLo was designed to sit on top of the body rather than within a cut-out, which streamlined the production process and lowered costs. Some of the parts Gretsch used were stock items, but it's incorrect to assume the HiLo is essentially half a Filter'Tron.

The only feature they share is the plastic bobbin. The HiLo'Tron is wound with thinner wire and has different polepieces. The bar magnet is mounted on an angled steel plate with a vertical steel magnet keeper on the other side of the magnet. The bridge HiLo'Trons were also jacked up on wood spacers.

Famed for its soft treble, woodiness and twang, this was the pickup fitted in the Tennessean George Harrison used on the *Beatles For Sale* and *Help!* sessions. The intro to *House Of The Rising Sun* by The Animals is another clear example of HiLo tone. It's a quintessential 60s sound, but even amongst Gretsch fanatics, the HiLo'Tron divides opinion like no other Gretsch pickup. In fact, the first Gretsch guitar I played was a vintage Tennessean, and it was so wimpy I assumed there had to be something wrong with it. Filter'Trons aren't exactly high-output pickups, but with a single coil wound to a DC resistance between 2.9k and 3.4k, the HiLo's output is even lower.

However, it's unfair to dismiss HiLos as the poor relation. Like many others, TV Jones is a big >

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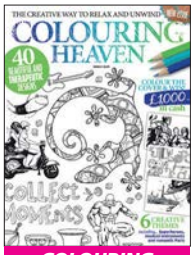

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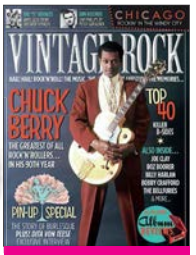

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fan, although he recommends careful adjustment to bring out the best tone. Rather than raise the polepieces, he suggests shimming up the pickup on foam to bring the coil as close as possible to the strings. This raises output, improves clarity and widens frequency response.

### Super'Tron

Although it's the same size as a Filter'Tron, the Super'Tron has full-width laminated blades rather than adjustable polepieces. Gretsch regarded the Super'Tron as a premium pickup, and it was fitted to various models – including the Viking, Monkees, Roc Jet, Astro Jet, Streamliner and some basses.

Maybe Gretsch was responding to a demand for more powerful pickups when the Super'Tron was introduced in 1964. The blades were also intended to maintain output level when strings were being bent. Although it's probably the most obscure of the classic-era Gretsch pickups, the Super'Tron has a loyal following amongst Gretsch players, who praise its sweet treble, full body and higher output.

Michiel Helshoot of Elektra Amps is a long-time fan, describing them as "full and articulate, without getting woolly or muddy like many humbuckers do. The note separation is better than Filter'Trons, due to the increased clarity of the pickup. Interestingly, the surface of the blades that faces the strings isn't radiused. Despite that, I've never noticed a clear difference in string-to-string output level. It sounds very well balanced the way it is, both with the modern TV Jones version on my Country Gent and the vintage ones with laminated blades that are on my '70 Viking."

### The mod squad

Until fairly recently, TV Jones was the only after-market pickup manufacturer specialising in Gretsch-style pickups. Having worked on Brian Setzer's guitars for many years, he was definitely the right person for the job and TV Jones pickups deserve their fine reputation.

This didn't go unnoticed, and Gretsch made a very shrewd move. Unusually for a big-name guitar manufacturer, Gretsch was happy to acknowledge that someone else was making high-quality versions of its own pickups and installed TV Jones units on its top-of-the-line models. The relationship continues to this day.

The TV Jones product line has expanded enormously. These days, the company sells a full range of vintage-style replacements for Filter'Trons, HiLos and DeArmonds. There are hot versions, Filter'Trons in Dynasonic cases and Dynasonics in Filter'Tron cases. A Setzer signature Filter'Tron features unmatched coils with no wax potting – just like Brian's Stray Cats originals. The Duo-Tron is a recently introduced recreation of a never previously manufactured Ray Butts prototype from '57, featuring polepieces and blades.

Thanks to guitars such as Fender's La Cabronita, and various boutique builders, Gretsch-style pickups have never been more popular. Now, there are countless variations on the Filter'Tron and scores of manufacturers making them.

Relatively few companies offer authentic Dynasonic replacement pickups. Besides TV Jones, there's Seymour Duncan with the vintage-spec Dyno and a humbucker-sized Dynobucker. Both are expensive Custom Shop products, but very well regarded.

Fender has owned the Dynasonic name for some time and made two types of pickup that look like the Dynasonic. Former Fender pickup expert Bill Turner has explained the difference as: "The DeArmond 2K and 2000 are wholly different animals. The 2K is configured like a P-90 with steel polepieces. The 2000 uses only ¼-inch alnico 5 polepieces in the bobbin, the sound is bright with that great rockabilly snap."

These days, players in a wide variety of genres are chasing the Gretsch sound by installing Gretsch-style pickups in all kinds of hollow and solidbody electrics. But be warned: it's a slippery slope and before you know it, you'll be twanging away on your very own G-branded axe.

## BUYER'S GUIDE

Here are four of the best currently manufactured repros of the most important and well-loved vintage-era Gretsch pickups. There's plenty of crossover with some of these manufacturers, too, so do check their websites for the full range of Gretsch-inspired pickups on offer.

### TV JONES T-ARMOND $160 TO $170 EACH

This vintage-spec Dynasonic is available in original vintage, humbucker-size and P-90 soapbar formats. Made with American cylinder magnets, sets are calibrated for bridge and neck placement with DC resistances of 12k and 8k respectively. The T-Armond is available with chrome and gold plating.

### MCNELLY SPARKLETRON £94 EACH OR £189 PER SET

The SparkleTron is manufactured in Canada by McNelly Pickups and features wax-potted coils hand-wound with 42 AWG plain enamel wire, full-sized alnico 5 magnets and ¼-inch wood spacers. The set we reviewed absolutely nailed the vintage Filter'Tron tone, and you can also order the coils without wax potting if you prefer.

### MOJO PICKUPS MOJOTRON BLADE £150

Made in the UK, Mojo's version of the Super'Tron is available in both vintage and humbucker-style formats. It features 42 AWG wire, a vintage-correct ¼-inch custom-made alnico magnet and solid rather than laminated blades. The neck and bridge are wound to 4.2k and 5k respectively.

### GRETSCH HILO $114 EACH

Granted, it's no surprise that nobody really bothers with HiLos because the market must be tiny. TV Jones has a version but you can buy Gretsch's own HiLo repro from Angela Instruments – along with lots of other groovy Gretsch-related pickups and products.

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*Also available at Barnes & Noble USA and import stockists worldwide

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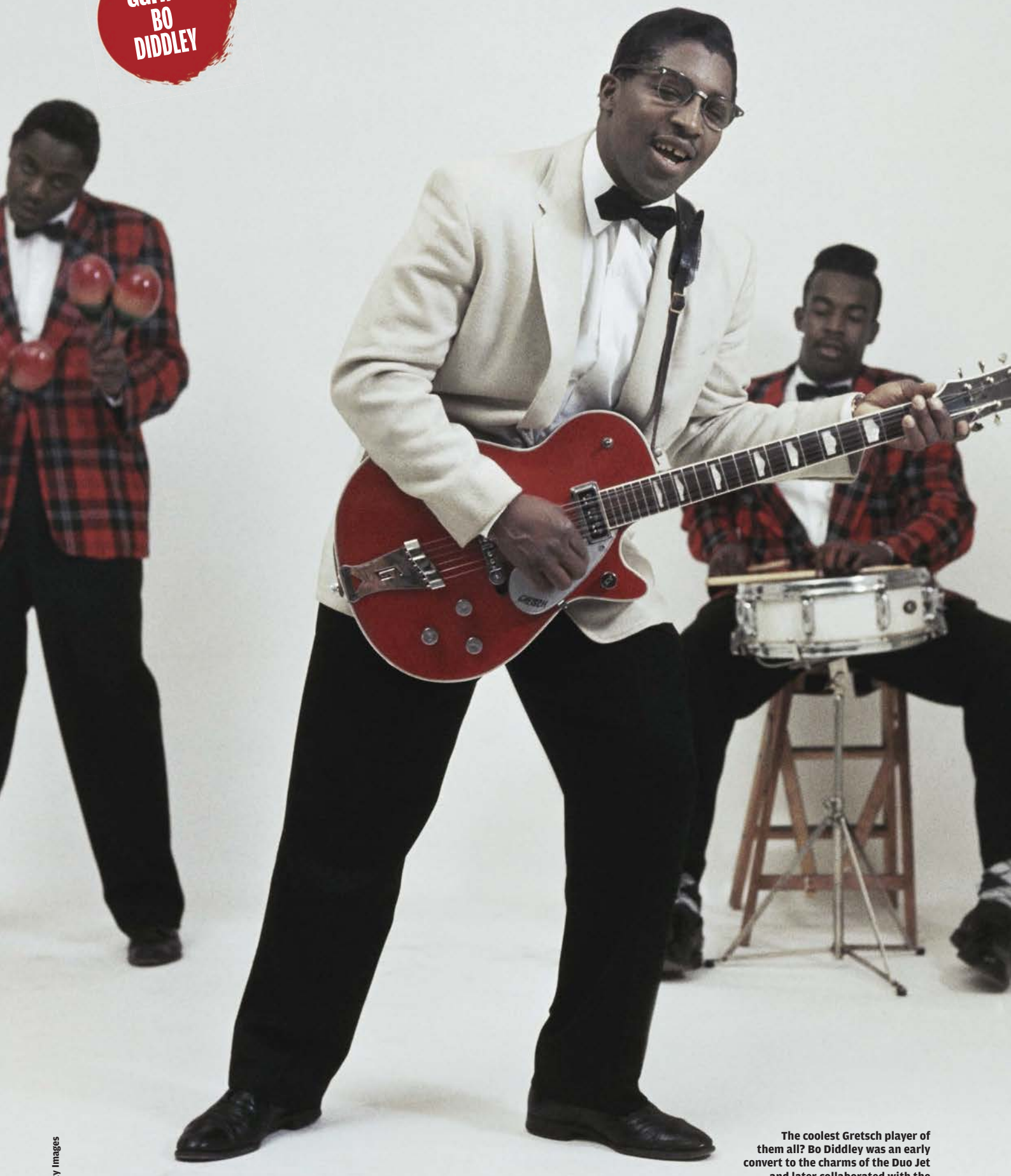
STAR GUITAR
# BO DIDDLEY



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**The coolest Gretsch player of them all? Bo Diddley was an early convert to the charms of the Duo Jet and later collaborated with the company on some wild designs...**

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